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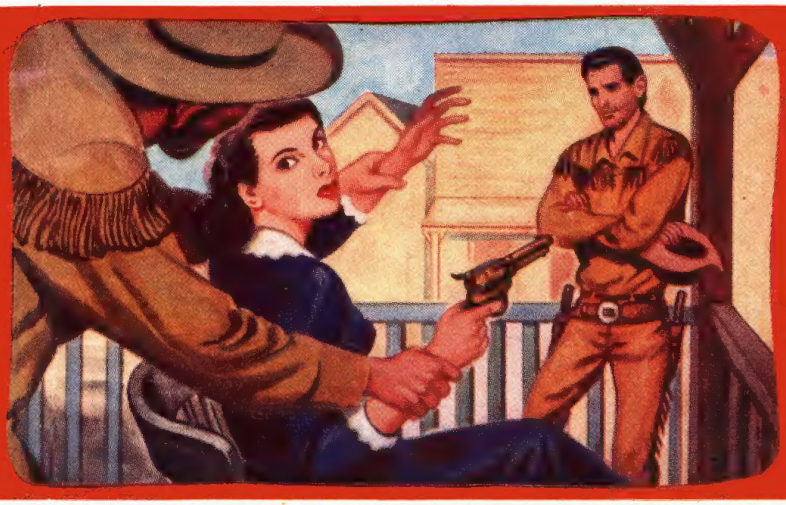
TRIPLE WESTERN

THREE NOVELS IN ONE MAGAZINE



WILD MEN of WYOMING

by TOM ROAN

ARROWS in the PASS

by FRANK CARL YOUNG

STRANGERS in TOPOK

by JAMES W. ROUTH

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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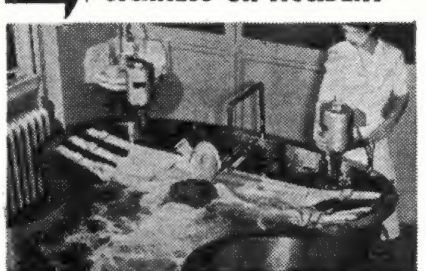

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THREE WESTERN ACTION NOVELS

TRIPLE WESTERN

VOL. 11, NO. 1 A THRILLING PUBLICATION JUNE, 1952

WILD MEN OF WYOMING

In spite of the fact that one of them happened to be a gorgeous woman, when the last of the Benders met the last of the Devines hell boiled in Wyoming

TOM ROAN 10

ARROWS IN THE PASS

Through the black of night Lewt Marshland must gamble on driving his herd across a land of starving Indians, well aware of how deadly arrows could be

FRANK CARL YOUNG 64

STRANGERS IN TOPOK

It was a rainy night in Topok, and she was just another pretty girl to the tall, yellow-slickered cowboy till he found they were both marked for death

JAMES W. ROUTH 101

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JIM HENDRYX, JR., *Editor*

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MULE POWER

By Leslie Ernenwein

SOME important military men are convinced that the Army pulled a big boner when it disbanded the horse cavalry. There is a good chance that this gallant arm of the service may be re-instated along with the traditional Army Mule, because of tragic experiences in Korea.

As one high-ranking officer put it: "Bad roads and mountainous terrain have made it necessary to make pack mules out of the boys in the infantry."

Speaking of mules reminds me of a confab I had with Fred Morris about the long-eared equine. We were discussing the old days when Fred drove a jerkline freight outfit between Holbrook, Ariz., and Fort Apache. He was with I Troop of the Fifth Cavalry whose quartermaster corral held upwards of a hundred mules.

Smarter Than Horses

"A mule," Fred announced, "is much smarter than a horse."

Being a horse lover from way back I couldn't accept that without an argument. "Maybe a certain mule might be smarter than a certain horse," I objected, "but not as a breed."

"There ain't no maybe about it," Fred insisted. "Any mule is smarter. Did you ever hear of a mule founderin' himself by bein' hoggish at a grain bin, or drinkin' too much water when he's hot? Hell no, and you never will. Mules savvy how to take care of themselves. What did they use in Death Valley to haul them big borax wagons? Mules. And you know why? Because a mule wouldn't kill himself pullin' too hard or too fast in that hellish heat."

Although the freighter Fred drove at Fort Apache was a six-mule affair and much lighter than the 20-mule borax outfits, he wheeled through some real rough country.

"There wasn't no nice smooth roads up there in those days," he recalled. "Just a set of wheel ruts that was God-awful boggy when it rained. I've saw the time my mules would waller up to their bellies, the gumbo was so deep. And it was purely awful in the winter when we had to buck them snow drifts."

Fred Morris isn't the only man who has an abiding admiration for the loud-braying breed. Frank M. Smith, who made a fortune in Death Valley borax, started out as a typical jerkline driver, swearing at mules. But later he learned to swear by them.

Too Tough to Die

After discovering a rich deposit of ulexite, a borax concentrate worth $400 a ton, and acquiring the land, Smith was faced with the problem of transporting his product across Death Valley's scorching desert. It was 162 miles from Furnace Creek to the nearest railroad at Mohave. There wasn't a habitation in that long stretch where the temperature rose to 150 degrees Fahrenheit. Horses, he feared, couldn't survive such conditions. Could mules?

Smith thought they could, and proceeded to prove it. He bought spans and spans of mules, hired men to train them in 20-mule teams. He built wagons that could tote 12 tons of borax. To give you an idea of what huge wallopers those wagons were, here are some statistics right off the jockey-box:

They had wheels seven and a half feet in diameter with 22 inch hubs and iron tires eight inches wide. Resetting one of those tires was a considerable task. First the tire was chiseled off when heat expansion and shrinkage of the wooden wheel made

such repair necessary. Shortened to fit, the tire was welded together on a blacksmith's anvil. The rear tires weighed 600 pounds and were handled by half a dozen men who used 6-foot hooks to carry the hot tire to the wheel.

Two such wagons, in addition to a trailer tank wagon, were used with each team of twenty mules. Thus the total haul, including borax, water and food plus the weight of the three vehicles, approximated thirty tons. No wonder they called such outfits mule trains!

Those jerkline drivers were real he-men. They had to be. In addition to enduring heat and thirst they must control twenty mules and boss a "swamper"—the helper who made camp, cooked, gathered firewood and acted as brakeman on the rear wagon.

Although the driver was undisputed king of the caravan, he had to be a combination veterinary, blacksmith, wheelwright, and an expert in manipulation of the long-lashed blacksnake whip. They were a wondrous breed, those drivers: fluently profane, yet patient; tough as bullhide, yet sentimental enough to give their mules pet names.

Tried and True

Most famous of the Death Valley drivers was William Parkinson, better known as Borax Bill. Men who knew him claim that Parkinson had the most expressive vocabulary and popped the snapper of his long whip with an artistry that baffled the eye. "He could flick a gnat off a mule's rump without touching a hair," one admirer proclaims.

The borax teams traveled on a schedule more exact than most railroad trains. A chain 120 feet long extended from the wagon to the lead mules, and each following span was hitched to the chain by sets of singletrees and a doubletree. Riding the nigh or left mule, the driver communicated his signals by use of the jerkline which ran through harness rings of each nigh-side mule.

When it came to guiding the strung-out team around a curve, the nigh leader was boss mule. In response to the driver's command this animal would swing its teammate wide—so wide, when necessary, that some of the following mules would have to jump the chain and pull at right angles, then cross over the chain again when the course straightened out.

Those mules and the drivers who handled them prove what Fred Morris and some high-ranking military men are saying today: "When conditions are too tough for anything else, the mule will pull you through."

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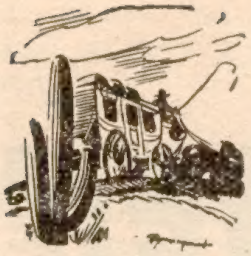
REVEALING HIS IDENTITY, BERT ACCOMPANIES THE NARCOTIC AGENTS ON THE TRAIL OF THE MISSING DOPE.

TEN-BLADE PACKAGE HAS COMPARTMENT FOR USED BLADES



THE STAGE COACH

A Cargo of Range Facts and Oddities

THE VANITY OF women was the chief cause for the exploration and early settlement of the West. And, nope, we didn't either get pitched off a tall bronc onto our collective heads.

The way it's figured, the demand for furs with which to cloak our fair damsels against the raw winds and in the latest fashion, was what put the price up to where trappers and fur traders were willing to risk their necks in the wild Western hinterlands. Sort of stands to reason, at that.

* * * * *

INDIAN PUEBLOS in New Mexico have adobe walls up to two feet thick which provides insulation against both heat and cold.

This recalls the story of the old mountain man who wore his fur underwear even in mid-July, and with the fur side in, "On account of what keeps out the cold should keep out the heat," was the way he told it.

* * * * *

MAYBE PORCUPINES are slow, and maybe they're not so bright as some, but they can sure do a lot of damage. Roy A. Phillips, supervisor of the Custer National Forest in Montana, where 900 porcupines were killed last year, has advised rangers, stockmen, fishermen and hunters to keep killing the persistent little animals. The reason: it is estimated that porcupines destroy as much Montana timber in one year as a 20,000-acre fire. They dote on tree bark, especially in the winter time.

* * * * *

A LEGENDARY gold mine is one of the most popular "sports" of Arizona. Every spring the Dons Club, a group of 50 Phoenix business and professional men, conducts a trek into the Superstition Mountains in search of the famed Lost Dutchman gold mine.

One of the favorite events of the year, the trek draws about 1200 people. The Dons charge just enough to pay expenses and to finance their yearly program of travelcades to points of interest in Arizona, including the Grand Canyon, Indian reservations, ruins of early structures and dude ranches.

* * * * *

THE ONLY poisonous lizards in the United States are the Gila monsters of New Mexico and Arizona, it says here. But we would like to inquire about those little lavender monsters with the brindle hackles we've seen slithering down the walls after a particularly hilarious evening. It's our guess that the Gilas can't hold a candle to them for pure poisonousness.

* * * * *

TWO FARSIGHTED cattlemen of Hickory, Pa., have reversed the usual procedure by bringing Western ways to the East. In the shadow of the great industrial metropolis of Pittsburgh, Frank Murdoch and Bob Dieseroth, partners in the Hickory Ridge Farm, do plenty of riding, roping and branding on their acres of rolling pastureland.

The partners recently added a registered Brahman bull and four Brahman cows to their stock of 60 Herefords. They plan to crossbreed the strains in the hope of getting bigger and better beef cattle—about 2500 pounds per head (including horns and tail).

* * * * *

THE HOPI INDIANS of the Southwest were using coal to bake their pottery five to six centuries before American white men first mined coal in Virginia in 1700.

We've had no word from Moscow on this as yet, though we expect they'll claim to have put the Hopis up to it.

* * * * *

WINNING A PLACE among the taller yarns of the year was this item submitted to the Burlington Liars Club by E. N. Roupe of Townsend, Montana:

"It got so cold out here in Montana last winter that one day my hound dog took out after a rabbit and they both froze solid while on the dead run. In May, when they thawed out, the dog caught the rabbit."

A Novel by TOM ROAN

WILD MEN

In spite of the fact that one was a gorgeous woman, when the last of the Benders met the last of the Devines hell boiled in Wyoming!

I

THEY were like eight ghost horsemen slowly riding eastward high in the sky. Five were drinking poisonous Indian rum that made them reel in their saddles and burst into startling fits of hellishly outlandish singing. But even when it came to the sober, a wilder, woolier and meaner gang of swashbuckling devils never lived.

Late morning fog made them wet and cold. It hugged the yellow rock cliffs that were the north face of the long mesa, wreathing and blotting it out from the valley below to a knee-high curling and low rolling on the rim. Up here each rider was a specter shape whose skeletonlike horse seemed to walk and wade in the very edge of a great cloud suspended between heaven and earth.

It was a ragged, bearded and buckskinned lot, unkempt hair matted and stringing to the shoulders of most of them. Neither scissors, razors nor burning twigs pulled from a campfire had touched their beards for weeks. Food had been hard to get, and their hollow eyes were like burned holes in their lean and drawn faces.

OF WYOMING

Stabbing bursts of yellow fire were here, there—everywhere!

They had a right, perhaps, to be mean and near wild. Behind them lay a hundred miles of fighting trail, and bitter tears of defeat filled with sudden and sometimes horrible death.

"And at last," bawled a cracked and high-pitched voice in the strung-out line, "we're coming to Hell Crick Crossing, the meanest place on earth, they say, but not half mean enough for us! Sing, damn you, *sing!* Let 'em know some of Hell Bender's long-haired Texans are still alive and full able to fight!"

Hell Creek Crossing was less than two thousand yards away, but the rim only marked the top of the cliffs. It would be another mile before they would come to a break where men and horses could go down. A few steps here to the left meant sheer space and a straight-down drop for eight hundred feet to the grassy floor and endless seas of jack-pined knolls that were the valley floor.

As it was, the entire town in the distance seemed to know this rough and tough gang was up here. Scores of eyes were watching down there, little crowds gathering, men and even women speculating. And certain men would be polishing and oiling their fighting tools, getting ready to meet one of the most dangerous men the great Lone Star State of Texas had ever produced.

THE settlement was the usual Wyoming railroad and cattle town sprawled out on a big flat rimming the north side of a creek shaded with cottonwoods. Mostly unpainted houses, great falsefronts, dives, wagon yards and long warehouses. The two glaring-bare and dusty strips of earth called the streets were split and held apart by the railroad tracks, the shining ribbons of iron that came streaking out of the low benchlands in the east to go fading away in the flat-topped knolls and bald-headed buttes in the west.

Following the general rule that seemed rarely broken, the best part of the town was on the north side of the tracks. There those supposed to be the more sane and sober resided, some in houses on the rimrocked lifts east and west of the northside street that had recently been given the name of Glory Road. On a bench north of the town were the more pretentious homes of the bankers, cattle buyers, the owners of stores, saloons and warehouses.

Glory Road could boast of a sidewalk along its upper side. There were also wide porches, an endless line of convenient hitch-racks. Here the stores, the saloons, hotels and gambling houses had a decided leaning to pomp and frontier splendor. The women of both the upstairs and downstairs places were generally young. Some were rated as beautiful—and those so inclined were noted for being much neater and refined than their sisters across the tracks when it came to pinching a man's poke or rolling a cantankerous drunk.

South of the tracks it was anybody's guess. There copious squirts from ten-cent bottles of cologne hid many things behind their sometimes blinding clouds of aromatic oils, especially in such places as Windy Annie's, Rosie Quick's, Sal LeMoan's, and Blackjack Fanny's. But they all looked and smelled good to hairy and grimy-necked Texas cowboys just in off the long trails with their own brands of scents remindful of horses, longhorn steers and unchanged socks for weeks on end. What mattered smells when a man had a pocketful of gold and a lonely heart bleeding for the warmth of a woman's arms!

Right at the moment the most beautiful girl ever to set foot in Hell Creek Crossing, and the toast of every handsome blade who had had the opportunity to cast his eyes upon her, was seated in a willow rocking chair on the white-railed front porch of the three-story Kentucky Belle. The hotel was the boast of Glory Road, the most expensive place in town. Its mahogany barroom was the finest west of the Missouri, its dark-walled and deeply carpeted parlor of chance no less splendid, and the hotel

rated as one of the nicest in the entire West, from St. Louis to San Francisco.

Down in Texas men who had best known the girl in the rocking chair called her Dangerous Daisy Devine. Crowned with glorious dark-red hair, she had a complexion so faultless and fair a drop of rain might have never touched her face or hands, or a blade of sunlight ever fallen on her. She was five feet ten, full-grown, full-blown at twenty-three, now dressed in shining blue and a wide, cool hat. Inside her bosom, so neatly hidden it might have been a part of her, was a slender little six-shooter plated with gold, its ivory butt set with rubies, diamonds and emeralds.

Dangerous Daisy Devine's cool sea-green eyes were watching the clouds up on the rim. The illusion made by the fog was so perfect the riders there were in the sky, the horses ghoulish shapes walking the rim of the clouds. In the chair beside her was a small but powerful pair of binoculars. She lifted them, adjusted them, and sat picking out each man and knowing him by name and reputation.

And reputation was the most any of them had ever owned! Her full lips curled when that thought came to her.

A REPUTATION for gunsmoke and blood, for night riding and cattle and horse rustling up and down the Texas Border, for fierce and swift raids across the Border, hawks of the saddle ripping like screaming and gun-blazing eagles through the brush, along the rims of the *resacas*, and falling as merciless hell on lonely *pueblos*.

All her life Daisy Devine had heard such tales about the Benders. Devines had fought them, killed them, and had been killed by them. The father of that Bender up there on the cloud had killed her father. One of his brothers had killed two of her brothers. Hell Bender —that tall Dave up there on a ghostly horse! —had shot it out with one of her uncles and two of her cousins, and had stumbled away spitting blood, with three men dead behind him.

Once well again after hanging for many days between life and death, a Texas jury had turned him free, and whether she liked to remember it or not a lot of hard-headed fighting men on the Border had looked upon him as something of a hero.

Now the last of the Benders and the last of the Devines were about to meet again here in Hell Creek Crossing. And she had hoped—oh, how she had hoped! —that the long trail had seen the end of him, that he would never walk in front of her again.

And he was up there, big and bold, bearded and dirty, the devil himself on a smoky-black rack of bones. The binoculars told everything. He rode ahead of his men. Just behind him, right where he was usually found, was long and lean and buzzard-faced old Ute Brand, seventy-seven times a killer if half the reports were true.

Next was Mystery Smith, Whispering Jim Thadlow, Horse Jefferson, Spoon Motlow, Trigger Ben Black and Luke Rider, and small wonder that those fighting devils had come on through behind Dave Bender. Fighting was all they knew, all they would ever know, a crazy lot that somehow managed to live to fight again when all others died in a pile around them.

"They won't last long, Daisy."

Startled by the low voice behind her, Daisy Devine dropped the glasses in her lap. The man who spoke, Raul Scanlin, could move without a sound, a broad and thick-chested man of fifty, with dark hair gray at the temples from a daily dusting of white powder. He stood six-feet-two, and weighed two hundred and thirty, quite a handsome figure in perfectly cut gray, a silvery white hat topping his careful curls.

"You scared me, Uncle Raul." Calmness had returned to her face as she looked up at him. "You get about so quietly."

"Indian scouting in my younger and

wilder days, Daisy." His teeth glinted under a small mustache as he looked down at her. "Something I can't forget, I suppose. It won't be out of order here—not when that whelp on the rim and his gang get here!"

"You said they'd never get here!"

"And I was never more certain of anything in my life." A frown filled his carefully shaven and powdered face, smoky-gray eyes narrowing to mere streaks. "They have had every reason, every excuse to be dead and rotting in shallow graves and holes with the rest of their crowd. But don't let it worry you. In Hell Creek Crossing they won't last much longer than it takes for men to die!"

"All of them, or just David Bender?"

"Hell Bender!" he corrected her with a snap. "The 'David' part you so often use rowels me, as you well know. But no matter." He shrugged his big shoulders and turned away. "Everything is set. If you don't mind I'd rather you would keep your seat here on the porch. He's sure to spot you the first thing, and here he'll come to stand and gloat. It is arranged that he will never quite get to you."

"I see." She nodded. "I suppose you will walk out of the hotel and face him as he strides or rides up—"

HIS tone was like something biting at her now. "You know damned well I won't! Why should I risk bodily harm facing a killer wolf like Hell Bender, when we have men who would hate me to their dying day if I cheated them out of their right to shoot him down?"

"The excuse you so quickly muster is more than ample!" She looked up with a strangely cold smile curling her lips. "To others, I mean. I know my dear, dead mother's handsome brother would not face David Bender over the cocked tubes of a double-barreled shotgun if David had his hands tied behind him and his back roped to a stout tree. Just do as you say you're going to do, and bother me no more with it."

"You're a damned strange woman these days, Daisy!" He started to move on back behind her, the tall heels of his fancy black boots harsh on the floor. A yard away he stopped, something like a leer filling his face and eyes. "Sometimes one would think you want to see the ruthless beast left alive!"

"Maybe"—her smile was harder—"I'm like you say of the men. I inwardly cringe at the thought of somebody else robbing me of the kill with my own hand. How will the town take it?"

"One of the first things I always do"—he smirked— "is to settle my coming scores with the law. A few bursts of gunsmoke will never bother Marshal Push McCoy. Gunsmoke, as a matter of fact, is his professional calling. Be ready to duck away from that chair when the time comes."

II

SCANLIN had said all he wanted to say, and he went on, walking rapidly away around the corner of the porch. Raul Scanlin, himself, would not be hurt, regardless of what happened.

In times like this he made it a point never to be armed with weapons that could be seen. It was the best policy. Few fighting men were brazen enough to shoot another down when he showed no signs of bearing weapons. Wyoming still hanged men for that, and it was rare when even a staunch citizen of these wild towns could escape the rope for breaking that unwritten law.

A man with brains—as Raul Scanlin had always boasted he possessed—did not have to bloody his hands with killings. Not when there were others willing and even eager for the opportunity to settle the score for him, and at the same time pay off a few old hates for themselves. He hired the best men, judged strictly as professional gunmen constantly willing to further their reputations.

Binoculars lifted, Daisy Devine was

"Drag your gun or take it naked!" Ute Brand called

again watching the riders. Fog up there filled the great V sloping up to the rim, the break where herds of cattle and wagons from the far south found their way down. Still only so many ghostly figures, Bender and his men had now reached the place. Like riders dropping out of sight in the clouds they were coming down, one after the other until the fog hid them.

Daisy Devine lowered the glasses. Cool, always self-possessed, she sat back in her chair. Her uncle was already sending his gunmen to their appointed places. A short, stout man of forty with a low-lying dark beard now leaned against the corner of the porch, a low clump of shrubbery in front of him. He was to the woman's right. A tall man appeared to her left, something of a gay old dog with a recently shaved and powdered thin face, his long paws of hands dropped innocently enough over the buckles of his gun-belts.

Two other shaggy individuals were moving quietly into place. One stopped to lean against a hitch-rack beyond the tall old dog. The other stopped at a rack beyond the short man half-hidden at the corner of the porch. All were quiet, tense-faced men trying to look as unconcerned as possible.

Daisy Devine looked southward again, on past the houses and low dives be-

yond the tracks. Over the tops of the cottonwoods along the creek she saw billows of fog rolling aside in the V-shaped break at the foot of the cliffs. Out of it came a tall rider that was Dave Bender, right behind him the mean old Ute Brand and the others, the fog appearing to cling and drag in banners behind them.

It would not be long now. Their horses were breaking into a gallop. In a few minutes the cottonwoods along the creek were hiding them. Bender was still in the lead when he appeared on the rim of the rise, riding out of a broad alleyway between two long, low warehouses. In the middle of the railroad tracks he pulled to a halt, the others quickly forming a half-moon behind him,—the devil here at last and ready for the bands to start their hellish playing!

Without realizing it something faltered in Dangerous Daisy Devine's sea-green eyes. In spite of the half-moon of fighting men behind David Bender she seemed to see him as just one man, long, lean, bearded and grimy, the once-proud face hollow. The same ghostlike something that had been on him up there on the clouds still clung to him, a lost figure who had come through hell. He was looking straight at her as if he had known exactly where to find her.

She saw him lift his right hand a few inches above his thigh. A thumb wiggled. Reluctantly the half-moon behind him began pronging out and away from him. His keen eyes had evidently seen everything, and he knew what was waiting for him. The first thought, as always, was to get himself fully in the clear, his men safely away from him.

RIGHT now he fascinated her as nothing else on earth ever had. Surely it was not real, that one man knowing what he was facing, and going to face it alone. She had an unbelievable feeling that she could almost sense figures there around and behind him when the others had moved away. The unseen and long-dead spectres of Benders, perhaps, coming up or down to watch the play, on hand to watch the last one stand, or fall and die.

"Watch him." The low warning seemed to rumble from the old man to her left. "He's a-coming on, all right, and alone as the Benders always did. We got others watching the rest of them."

Bender's worn-out horse was coming on. At eighty paces away he pulled up, and quietly slid down from his saddle. A slap sent the horse slowly plodding away to his right. Keen eyes in the bearded face raked this way and that, seeing everything. They centered at last on Dangerous Daisy Devine's white, tense face. Something like a smile twisted the bearded lips. His battered hat came off, hanging loosely in his right hand. Slowly he came on, walking a line it seemed that was going to bring him straight to her.

A voice jarred to her left:

"When you're ready, Bender, make your play!"

"Against only four?" His eyes seemed to whip right and left again. "I was sure there would be more."

"Make your play!"

"Let's see you make it for me—and get it done!"

Daisy lurched forward in her chair at the last instant. Her mouth flew open to scream. A noise that might have been the shattering of all the glass in town drowned her out. Stabbing bursts of yellow fire seemed to be here, there, everywhere.

Out there in the dust a man was suddenly down, rolling, lunging, shooting back with both hands.

There was a soblike gasp behind the shrubbery at the corner of the porch. A short, stout man lunged forward, the shrubbery cracking, splintering, appearing to fall apart to let him come pitching forward to land on the sidewalk on his nose and face. A grunt, a moan came from his lips, and he was suddenly still.

Daisy Devine never saw the old man to her left go down, turning in his tracks, body twisting in one violent spasm. He fell backward, his head first to hit the sidewalk, long legs kicking apart, long arms flapping out at either side of him.

She saw the man to her right fall, saw him come bobbing out from the end of the hitch-rack, saw the long six-shooter burst fire and a mushrooming ring of smoke. He went to the ground shooting, tried to come up, and fell back, a blade of red suddenly pouring from his head.

There was no accounting for the pretty six-shooter that was suddenly in Dangerous Daisy Devine's hand. Her eyes were on the leaping, dancing, bobbing and swaying thing that was the last man on his feet to her left behind the hitch-rack. There was no sense to the startled thoughts rushing through her head. Her weapon started up. A grimy paw on the end of a long arm covered with ragged buckskin shot across her shoulder from behind.

"Stay it, woman!" rasped a mean old voice, the hand a gripping eagle talon on her wrist. "It's the way of the damned fool to come it alone in a foul fight of four agin one, but no six-gun in the hand of a hair-brained hussy like you is goin' to cut him down!"

"You—you thing!" She tried to wheel in her chair. In her startled fury she tried to whip the muzzle of her weapon around on him. The gripping talon on her wrist made her drop it. "Where did you come from—getting here behind me like this!"

OLD Ute Brand was laughing in her face. "I come from hell, maybe!" He gave her wrist a twist that sprawled her back in the chair. "Not from the stinking grave you and your scummy buzzard uncle dug up for me. I'm the meanest man that ever walked, and I get meaner each time I look at you or think of you and the dirty louse called Raul Scanlin! Set, damn you, set, you—you purty, panting pussy-cat you!"

"My men will kill you for this!" she screamed.

"Your men!" His laughter became a wild ass braying in her white face. With the swift rake of a toe he sent her pretty six-shooter sliding under the railing and off the porch. "Look at what four of your sick buzzards tried to do to one lone man out there in the dust! Hell, they lie a-bleeding on the ground where they dropped! You ain't got no men, woman! They ain't got the fighting guts of groundhogs when it's a stand up and show down! Before the sun goes down we'll have the rest all dead or run out of town."

He bent over her to laugh in her face again. Then he turned and left her, jumping the railing of the porch like a wild goat on the run, and moved on out to the edge of the sidewalk with a long six-shooter uptilted in each had.

"I'm bad!" he howled. "I'm wild and woolly! Let all you Hell Crick Crossing critters gather around and see who can curry me below the knees! I'm an unhung wolf from Texas, and I can whop any sixteen men in your damn town. Come and get me while I drool for your blood!"

"Let up with it, Ute!" Bender slapped him on the shoulder as he moved forward, six-shooters hastily reloaded and back in their holsters. Hatless, hat in the dust behind him, long hair stringing down, he came right on to the railing of the porch. "Howdy, Daisy, my darling lady fair!" His eyes glinted, strong teeth shining through his beard. "Seems that we meet again!"

His smile became a leer as he leaned against the railing, face almost in her face, the smell of horses and the long trail heavy upon him. "And how you hurt me, Daisy! Running away from me like you do! But I have something to tell you now." He leaned even closer, making her crowd back and back in her chair. "Before we part again you won't want to run away from me any more." He laughed in he rface. "That's right,

Daisy! As sure as God made women the beautiful and damned mean things they can be, I'll have you putting your pretty shoes under my bed with your own little lily-white hands." He laughed again in the scared white face. "Do you want me to kiss you now, darling?"—he was pushing so hard against the railing he was making it pop and crack—"or can you hold yourself away from my arms long enough for me to get a bath and a shave?"

For an answer she was suddenly wheeling the chair on one rocker. In a wild leap she was up, white-faced, and fleeing from the porch.

"You poor fool!" Sobered now, six-shooters back in their holsters, old Ute Brand glared in Bender's face when he turned from the railing. "I've always said you was sort of crazy or something about that wild Texas mare. Why didn't you slap her jaws off, anyhow?"

"I want her in one piece, Ute." A hard glint had come back to Dave Bender's eyes. "Some day I'll probably skin her alive—and make her like it too, the little hussy."

"That's talking some sense, now," nodded the old man, "but I still have doubts about you doing it. Here comes the whole damn town!"

"Take it easy." Bender caught his arm. "Everybody must have seen the fight, but if they want another we've got it for them."

"Which ain't no lie." A chuckle came from Brand. "The rest of the gang's in place, guns ready and fingers itching. Damned if I ain't just about decided that I'm going to like Wyoming, Dave. Wonder where a man would find Stinking Mag's Dirty Bed Hotel? They say it ain't half as bad as the name might sound to the meek and the wary."

III

EXCITEMENT never lasted long in Hell Creek Crossing. Marshal Push McCoy was a man who seemed to know his frontier. He was a six-foot, blond-mustached man of forty, forever dressed in gray, it seemed, and decidedly on the handsome side. He had been marshal of Buffalo Bend, Lock Jaw, Rattlesnake Butte, and several tough towns east and west of those along the railroad. There were eleven notches on the butts of his long black six-shooters to mark the kills he, himself, had made.

Everybody had seen the fight here, four men attacking one lone man, and it was almost past history by the time the smoke had cleared and the dead been carried away to the rear room of Dr. Bill Gunter's office on the north side of Glory Road. Quiet funerals on a flat-topped rise south of the creek would mark the end of it.

Keeping close to each other now, the next two hours were trying ones for most of Dave Bender's men. All wanted new clothing, hats and boots. All wanted hair cuts and shaves. Only three gave up without arguments when it came to stripping to the bare skin and sinking themselves to their necks and ears in enormous tubs filled with soapy hot water in the rear rooms of the town's best barber shop. Nature, they argued, had never intended for man to scald himself like a hog in a big half-barrel with a cockeyed Chinese standing there with a long-handled brush to curry him down the backsides and squirt perfume on his head and in the water to make him smell like a honky-tonk gal.

Gold was the one thing left from four big wagons and three thousand head of cattle that had started north out of Texas long, long weeks ago. Each man's belt was heavy with it, a fortune of slightly more than forty thousand dollars. All of it belonged to Dave Bender, and it was now the last of the Bender riches that had once been more than six hundred thousand dollars in cattle, horses, land and money on the Texas border.

Their worn-out horses had come first with the men. They were lodged in the best stables in town. Neither animal would have sold for more than five dol-

lars, but they were being fed, watered and curried as if they were the best horses that had ever touched hoofs to the ground of Wyoming. Rough and wild as most of these men were, horses never suffered in their hands if there was a way in the world to avoid it.

Almost every misfortune known to man had hit them on the long trail behind them. They had started out of Texas two weeks behind Raul Scanlin and the Devine herd of twenty-five hundred head and three big wagons loaded with supplies. Once north of the Texas line trouble had been the lot of the Bender riders, outlaws and renegade Indians from all the tribes falling on them, splitting the herd and playing merry hell in the dark.

They had been turned back five times in eleven days, the herd stampeded and sent scattering all over creation from the murderous fire of hidden riflemen on high slopes, and the slopes themselves turned to spilling and sliding rivers of loose rock.

Raul Scanlin had made the boast before leaving Texas that no Hell Bender herd would get through to Wyoming behind him. Thirteen good Texas fighting men had died trying to make that boast a lie. Whipped in twenty places, the big wagons burned when flaming dead treetops were rolled down on them from a towering slope, Dave Bender had seen the last of his herd vanish three nights later in a maddening downpour of rain and dark floodwaters. Even the storm had been on Raul Scanlin's side, for it had lasted for more than a week, blowing, raining and washing away all signs of trails.

Dave Bender had buried his dead and had spent three weeks trying to pick up the trail of the last of the herd, his supplies gone, every man forced to live from hand to mouth on the wild things his guns might bring down. Outlaws and renegade reds had trailed them even then, opening a rain of death on their campfires at night, making bullets sing in the air around them during the days.

NEVER had the fires of a feud burned hotter than the Bender-Devine feudal flames. No hate could have lasted longer and been more bitter. Not until toward the end had the Scanlins entered it. Only one Devine remained now, only one Scanlin, and one Bender left against the two with all the men and money they could use to see the end of him.

They looked like men no one in Hell Creek Crossing had ever seen before when they came out of the barber shop. Hot water, soap and plenty of toilet water had done as much for them as ten-cent bottles of cologne did for some of the dives south of the tracks. Even Ute Brand was willing to admit that Mystery Smith and Horse Jefferson smelled better.

"And with the fine new clothes and such," he had added, "the good shaves and hair cuts, I'm further notioned to move that Trigger Ben Black and Spoon Motlow look slightly more human than hog and buzzard. I ain't yet made up my mind about all the others. What we need now is a great big table loaded with grub, and of course a couple of jugs of whisky and a bucket of water without tadpoles or mud in it."

Drink was something to dread in times like this, but these men had long been known for being able to hold anything in the form of slops that came their way. In the hills to southward they had come upon a man in a buckboard loaded with rum. Two jugs of the terrible concoction, made for Indian trade, had changed hands while Dave Bender had questioned the man for more than thirty minutes about Hell Creek Crossing. From the rum-runner's bearded mouth he had been given a full description of the town and told exactly where to find Daisy Devine, her uncle, and the rest of the Texas wolves who had come north ahead of them.

They had headed for the Land of Joy, a three and a half-story saloon with a tall false-front glittering with white paint trimmed in glaring blue and red,

its name painted in gold. Bank Morgan, the burly, rusty-haired Irish owner, had set out from the beginning to outshine the Kentucky Belle. His establishment loomed higher above the board sidewalk of Glory Road, and was just across from the boxcars on a platform of cinders that made the depot, but the Land of Joy was still second-best in town.

"Some dump!" commented Ute Brand, taking in the place as they walked in. "Here, that rum-runner said, a man can get anything the soul or body desires, even to having a purty gal cut his finger and toe nails if he'll pay the price."

"I can't read." Mystery Smith's voice had been a whisper. "Is this the Dirty Bed the feller spoke about?"

"Hell, no, Ignorant!" Horse Jefferson laughed at him. Stinking Mag's place is supposed to be below the tracks. What is this here, anyhow, Dave? I didn't have my specs on when we come in."

They were as noisy as horses as a big Chinese in loose blue silks and a long black cue hanging down his back led the way upstairs. New boots squeaked. All their new hats were not exactly perfect fits, one riding high and looking top-heavy, another swallowing its owner's recently shorn head and closely scraped face.

Dave Bender did not want to risk this gang of half-wild men in the huge dining room, knowing that in their uncertainty and natural awkwardness they were apt to knock over tables and upset chairs as they scattered in behind him like half-scared sheep in a strange corral. So he had taken rooms upstairs on the second floor, both in the front and the rear.

A thousand dollars in gold had been planked down on the manager's desk to take care of them, and the big and ruddy face of Bank Morgan had smiled knowingly in the background. The Chinese led them first to the big room Bender had taken for himself, and due to be a general gathering place with its wide bay window overhanging the sidewalk.

FOOD was brought in a short time, four Chinese waiters trotting in with it like hurrying ponies. A long table had been set, covered with spotless linen and shining silver. Ute Brand picked up a large plate, looking at it curiously.

"Beats a cow chip to eat on." He grinned. "Ain't seen such fine fixings since your mammy used to set Christmas table down on the Rio, Dave. All this"—he waved at the lavishly furnished room—"kinda takes me back to her and your pa."

There was no talk yet about the shooting. Gunsmoke was all in a day's work. They lived with it, slept with it, and sometimes tasted it in the water they swallowed when they were thirsty. With Bender's cattle, his wagons and horse cavvy gone not one of them knew what he would do tomorrow. It didn't bother them.

Tomorrow might never come as far as they were concerned. They had seen too many of their former friends and relatives die, alive and healthy one day, dead and on the way to a grave the next, killed by bullets, mean horses or run over and cut to dark-red ribbons of flesh and broken bones on the ground once a stampeding herd of wall-eyed cattle had passed over them. A fighting man lived today, and to hell with tomorrow. Only a vague promise at best!

For a time there would be almost ever-certain lull. Raul Scanlin and the beautiful but dangerous Daisy had had their hands called. Without a doubt Scanlin had pushed his four best gunmen forward. Now they were dead, stretched on tables and their bodies getting cold, waiting only for coffins.

All Hell Creek Crossing was probably speculating. Gamblers would be placing bets in whispers. No one would openly talk. Men here as elsewhere would never want to be branded as taking sides with one crowd or the other. Side-takers were always marked men, and only fools turned themselves into walking targets to be killed when the first general fight started.

It was a good meal—huge and juicy steaks, steaming silver pots of rich coffee and all the trimmings to go with such a banquet. Drinks were there and plenty of them, and yet every man handled them with caution. Liquor enough to unsteady a man's hand or his eye was the certain mistake to get him killed if suddenly called upon to fight.

Long after the waiters were gone and the table cleared away a rap on the door made most of them drop hands close to their weapons. A smile lighted Ute Brand's face when the door opened and three young Chinese bellhops marched in with their arms loaded high with bundles, flat cartons and round pasteboard boxes.

"Dave's clothes!" cackled the old man. "Bought enough suits and hats and such to start 'imself a store."

IV

A SHORT time later the men were emptying their gold belts on the table for Dave. He began paying them off, doubling the pay they were supposed to get for every day since they had left Texas. As if it had been previously agreed upon each man counted himself out two hundred dollars from the stack of gold coins in front of him, and shoved the rest back to their boss.

"Just keep it for us, Dave," ordered Horse Jefferson. "Use all or any part you want for yourself. All we'll do is spend it. And"—he looked up with a grin—"what if I lose it all somehow?"

"There's some banks in Hell Crick Crossing, ain't they?" Whispering Jim Thadlow whispered the question, grinning from ear to ear. "Which might be willing to lend money with the right pair of six-guns to soft-up the hard hearts bankers are supposed to have?"

"And trains go through every day," agreed Mystery Smith with a nod and a decidedly serious face. "After being accused of all the things we didn't do because, maybe, we didn't have the chance, a few trains oughtn't to matter much."

"We'll wait until we go broke for that!" Dave Bender laughed at them. "But"—he shrugged, face suddenly serious—"the idea's worth keeping in mind."

He took the money downstairs, carrying it in two strong linen slips taken from the pillows on the bed. Bank Morgan was there to lock it up in the big steel safe for him. The big owner of the Land of Joy came out with a little information.

"Seems like speculation erred, Mr. Bender," he said, and smiled. "Talk had it that you and your men would arrive in town dead broke."

"And that"—Bender nodded—"probably came from a Mr. Raul Scanlin?"

"Some of the Scanlin crowd, also." Morgan turned to the counter that was the hotel desk and started writing out a receipt for the gold. "You are my guest. That naturally places me on your side even if I didn't want to be. All I'll ask of you is to keep your men as quiet as possible, and if trouble comes I'd appreciate them taking it outside. The light's better to shoot by in the street."

Both laughed, and Morgan handed Dave the receipt. At that moment a small Negro boy in a blue uniform and a red cap stepped up to Bender's right. He touched his cap, smiled, and bowed. In his hand was a small silver tray with a white envelope on it. At a glance Bender had read "Kentucky Belle" in gold lettering on his cap and on the left breast of his tight-fitting coat.

"You're Mr. Bender, sir? The note's for you."

Bender took it, and dropped a silver dollar on the tray, the boy smiling, bowing and backing away. Turning his back to Morgan, forgetting him for the moment, Bender walked to a deep overstuffed chair, and dropped into it with a frown.

This was something like the bolt from the blue men talked about. Even envelopes were rare in most places. People usually merely folded their letters,

sealed them, and wrote the address on the back. His name was on this, neat and perfect. A strange, hauntingly remindful pinch of perfume came to his nose as he opened the envelope. Elbows on his knees, hat on the back of his head, he unfolded the stiff paper of a letter, and sat there scowling, Morgan watching him intently from behind the counter of the desk.

In the same clear, almost bold writing that was on the envelope, he sat reading, and scarcely believing what he was seeing from one word to another. It read:

Mr. David Bender:
You may brand this as an offer for a truce or anything else you care to call it. If you are not afraid to come, I would like to see you in my suite at the Kentucky Belle. I expect you, of course, to come alone, and as soon as convenient.

Sincerely,
D. Devine.

"Well, I'm bedamned now," he muttered. "It just couldn't be the Daisy Devine I know who'd write a letter to Dave Bender."

He looked up. Bank Morgan was still staring at him, the ruddy face appearing to crack into a slow smile.

WHEN Dave went back upstairs, Ute Brand threw a fit.

"You're a fool, a double-barreled, knock-kneed, lantern-jawed damn fool!"

The others were no less angered, but they were too amazed and even startled to try to start an argument at the moment.

"It's only—only a trick to kill you!" old Ute declared. "Hella'mighty, you'd be walking right into a tiger's den alone!"

"I'm not exactly afraid of tiger dens, Ute."

"Neither was your dad!" raged the old man, pounding the arm of his chair with his fist. "He was just the same kind of a fool as you are trying to make yourself be! Didn't her dad send for him to come and meet him alone one evening at sundown? Wasn't it just to be the two of them to talk things over? Didn't your dad go to a broke-down old Spanish church on the rim of a *resaca,* and when he got there the whole church busted loose with fire and lead?" He waved his hands wildly, "Well, of course you can say your dad killed him, and others could later tell that her dad didn't know that gang was hiding in the church. That didn't stop the blood, the sudden red hell and death, did it? Will it make your carcass lie any happier in the ground when she comes out and says it was a mistake after her and Raul Scanlin's gunmen blow you full of holes?"

"I'm going, Ute, and that's all there is to it!"

"Then I'm goin' with you." The old man bounced to his feet, his new boots creaking. "I aim to be there with you, fool that you are, when the guns start going off!"

"By that, I reckon"—Horse Jefferson was on his feet—"we ain't part of this little gang of Texas hard-tails! We're going, too—leastwise I am, and nobody's going to stop me!"

"Just say you're going to get in line!" Trigger Ben Black gave him a violent shove that sent him staggering to one side. "The rest of us have rights in this! Hell, what happens to one happens to all."

"Back in your chairs, every damned one of you!" Dave Bender had to handle them like a man killing snakes before he could get them stopped. "It was agreed between us long before we came to Hell Creek Crossing that one wouldn't make any drastic moves without telling the rest beforehand. That's what I've done. Stay here! Wait here! If anything happens so I don't get back, Bank Morgan downstairs will divide that gold in his safe between you. I—"

"Now what's gold got to do with it?" snarled Ute Brand, looking ready to fight every man in the room. "A cow must of kicked you when you was a boy, Dave! Gold without you—"

"Sorry I mentioned it!" Bender threw up his hands. "I just wanted you to

know you were to have it instead of Morgan keeping it for himself if nobody asked for it."

It took fiive minutes more before he could get away. He left in a rumble of curses and mean mutterings. Down at the foot of the broad stairway Bank Morgan seemed to be waiting for him, and bluntly the hotel man asked a question.

"That message was from the woman, wasn't it?"

"And how"—Bender's lips tightened —"would you be guessing that?"

"I have ears, Mr. Bender." Morgan's smile was hard. "Being Irish, I listen. Being Irish, I also sometimes poke my tongue out. I've heard that Mr. Scanlin's not getting along so well with her of late. Thought"—he shrugged and was about to turn away—"it might be of some interest to you, Bender."

"Go on." Bender caught his arm. "You can be interesting. Has Raul Scanlin done something you don't like?"

"He's a damned dirty louse, and I've told him so to his teeth!" A glint that looked like fire beginning to burn was now in the Irishman's eyes. "He doesn't put his foot inside my door any more. I'm just as mean as the next one, Bender. Some call me one of the biggest crooks in Hell Creek Crossing. That's a lie. I'm the biggest damn crook in Hell Creek Crossing. I wouldn't do much more than cut your liver out and push it in your face—if there was enough money in it for me.

"Take this." He waved a heavy hand. "It's a dump, a dive, and I'm just another dive-keeper. I'm smarter, of course, than the dump-keepers south of the tracks, burned-out old bags like Stinking Mag and the Dirty Bed Hotel or Windy Annie and the beans they say she eats three times a day. It's a dive here just the same, but I always did hate a man, Bender, who couldn't be a crook without robbing his own family."

BENDER nodded, slowly beginning to smile. "Then the tale follows him all the way up here? Tell me the rest, Morgan. It has been common knowledge to all but the Devines themselves that the Scanlins robbed them of their eyeballs down in Texas, and—"

"No, you won't!" bawled a wild voice. "No, you won't do that to us, you overbearing big bully!"

It came from a broad doorway under the stairs and from the long barroom. With it came a sudden rush of feet, the sound of a table upsetting, a crash of glassware shattering on the floor, and of chairs overturning.

"We'll finish this talk later, Bender!" Bank Morgan wheeled as if a .45 had roared under him. "Business first!"

He was gone like a charging bull, going through the doorway to the barroom. Wanting no part in a barroom brawl, Bender moved on outside, and turned westward along the board walk. Bank Morgan was back in the picture before he had taken twenty paces. Red, white and blue swing-doors had popped, and there was the owner of the Land of Joy.

His big shoulders were back, head up. Each hand was gripped in the back of a greasy buckskin collar. A man knocked cold with a blow to the jaw was at either side of him. He dragged the limp figures clear of the doorway, and gave them a double sling that sent them scooting like dead lizards under the hitch-rack and out into the dust.

"And stay out!" he roared. "I want no part of you!"

Dave Bender walked on, not knowing at the moment that he had just seen two of Raul Scanlin's gunmen thrown out of the Land of Joy. Had that pair of knocked-cold men seen him now they probably would not have recognized him. A long-tailed black coat, gray doeskin trousers and a light-gray beaver had done things to him.

Even in hand-me-down clothing some men might look like fashion plates, and Bender was one of them. A double-breasted vest of golden velvet and a frilled white stock gave him the air of

a man who had spent most of his life behind a gambling table instead of in a saddle. Tucked neatly out of sight but within easy and instant reach were his six-shooters, the waistband holding them. Asleep or awake he was never without them.

Men along the street eyed him, at first only casual glances, then they stiffened, staring as they recognized him. In doorways in three places ahead tough-looking characters took second stares at him, and quickly turned to move back inside.

On the wide front porch of the Kentucky Belle a big black man in a blue uniform trimmed with gold opened the glassed door for him. For a moment the black face was one big smile, then the smile vanished, awe and popping eyes taking its place as the doorman recognized the caller.

V

IT WAS luxury which outshone anything Dave Bender had ever seen on the frontier that met his eyes when he stepped inside the Kentucky Belle. Deep rugs and overstuffed furniture upholstered in Spanish leather filled the long, wide lobby. Silvered chandeliers hung from the ceiling, their pale lights burning even at this time of the day. At the desk a smiling little baldheaded man of sixty greeted him.

"Good afternoon, sir, good afternoon!"

"I am calling," explained Bender, "on Miss Devine."

"Yes, sir." The little man bowed. "Yes, sir! Why—why—why, yes, s-sir!" Again Bender had been recognized. "You—you're expected, I suppose, sir?"

"Naturally."

"Oh, yes, I see!" The clerk was like a frustrated little old lady. He rubbed his hands, licked his lips, and looked helplessly to the right and left. "Who, sir, shall I say is calling?"

"Bender."

"Bender! Yes, Bender!" The thin hands fluttered again. In a dither he turned, and tried to blow into the mouthpiece of what looked like as many as twenty speaking tubes in a black slab of marble on the wall. A voice came down to him. "Bender!" He sputtered into the mouthpiece. "He—he said you expected him, Miss Devine!"

"Send him right up." Bender could hear that as it came out of the tube. "Please!"

"Boy!" Now the little man was back at the desk nervously tapping a bell. "Front! Boy, front!"

"Yes, sir!" It was the same little black boy who had brought the note. "Good evenin', Mr. Bender!"

"Take—Mr. Bender upstairs!" sputtered the little man. "To—to Miss—"

"Miss Daisy Devine's suite, yes, sir!" cut in the boy. "I know just where Mr. Bender wants to go, Mr. Pooley. Me and him knows each other."

It was beginning to be pretty galling to Dave Bender when he started up the stairs behind the boy. Five old ladies knitting in a huddle in the corner had dropped their work in their laps. They were staring, nodding and staring, the feathers on their hats waggling. He heard one of them say sibilantly:

"That's him!" It was as though she were parting with some startling secret. "That's the very man we were just talking about! My gracious, what's this town coming to!"

It was a relief to get past the top of the stairs and put them behind him. The black boy was leading the way to the front of the hotel. Before they could reach it a door opened straight ahead. It swung wide, and there she stood, waiting, tall and proud, head in the air.

Dave Bender handed the boy another dollar, and gave him a push to send him on back downstairs. For a second or two Dave just stood there, hat in hand. Daisy Devine spoke, voice icy.

"You might come in, please."

"Thank you!" He stepped on inside, eyes whipping glances right and left, seeing only the richest of rich furnishings in a huge parlor with an enormous

bay window above the porch below. Daisy Devine closed the door. He turned as he heard her click the key in the lock.

"Nice place you have, Daisy."

"Won't you have a chair by the window?"

"Yes, thank you!" He bowed, holding back a smile. "I was warned that I might be walking into a tiger den—"

"And does anything assure you that you're not?" she cut in.

"The sumptuousness, yes." He wiggled the hat in his hand. "Even a Devine would not want to devour a man on these beautiful rugs, and especially a beautiful Devine called Daisy."

"This is no time for the usual Bender horse-play!" she snapped. "Please take a chair!"

"Yes, of course!" He picked up a stout little French thing with its overstuffing covered with tapestry. "Anything to oblige such a charming, beautiful lady. Where would you have me take it?"

SHE stamped a tall-heeled foot angrily.

"Put that thing down! Sit in one near the window! Benders, I know"—she curled a lip—"are more at home on benches and soap boxes than chairs, but—"

"Do you know something?" He let the chair down with a bang, cocked a foot on it, and rested his elbow on the back of it. "I believe you have the most beautiful eyes in the world when you are angry, or afraid of something. They become so beautifully green and grave!"

"And what," she demanded, "would I be afraid of now?"

"Me—or some wild plan your uncle has in mind." He was watching her face closely. "Could he be watching and listening from beyond that tall draped portal behind you? If he is he had better start shooting before he stirs those drapes. Draped doorways make me nervous, Daisy."

"It's my bedroom!"

"And Jesse James," he reminded, "was killed in a bedroom, they say."

"If you are afraid, then please go look for yourself!" Again she stamped her foot. "You said you were told you were coming to a tiger den. Well"—there was a faint hint of a smile and a shrug—"this is it, Mr. Bender. Shall I bring out the big cat now or would you rather cool your perspiring brow sitting in one of those chairs by the window until the usual timidity of a Bender gets a grip on itself?"

"I think I'll sit, Daisy." He let his foot come back to the floor as he straightened, almost bursting out laughing at her now. "Even in your den I still say you have beautiful green eyes."

"There is one thing I must admit." She was minutes coming out with it, sitting there facing him, and him in a chair with his back to the heavy drapes at the side of the window, eyes still alert for sudden trouble. "Outwardly you are a marked improvement over what you were this morning when you rode into town."

"Outwardly, yes." He nodded. "To you I'm still Hell Bender inside."

"And always will be." Again he thought he could detect the faint hint of a smile. "This morning you looked like a ghost, like death."

"You should know all about death, Daisy."

"And do!" she readily agreed. "I was born to it, to blood and terrible wrongs. For which"—he was sure of her smile this time—"I give all and full credit to the Benders."

"All right, and fair enough, Daisy." He shrugged, sitting bent forward, elbows on his knees and slowly turning his new hat in his hands. "Let's get along with it. Why did you send for me?"

"Odd that you'd come, isn't it!"

"I'm a curious beast, as you might know, Daisy." His smile was gentle and easy. "My curiosity still burns. You didn't send for me, I know"—he frowned—"to ask any favors or offer any sort of a truce between us. Your motive must

be to help your Uncle Raul somehow."

"Help Uncle Raul!" Her eyes flashed. "Uncle Raul knows quite well how to take care of himself!"

"On your money!" His smile was hard, merciless. "The Scanlins always have been like that, every damned one of the breed, Daisy. Including," he added bitterly, "your own scheming, high-headed mother."

He might have slapped her across the face. She sat rigidly in her chair, white and speechless, hands gripped into bloodless fists.

"Even barber shops in this town have ears, Daisy," he was going on coldly. "And lips to tell what those ears hear, and in a Wyoming frontier town like Hell Creek Crossing some are able to retain certain decencies Raul Scanlin has never possessed. How much money's left out of the sale of your cattle, Daisy?"

DAISY jerked to her feet, a statue suddenly rising from its pose in a chair. "That's my business! I—I only wanted to tell you I didn't knowingly have anything to do with the burning of your wagons, the loss of your cattle and the killing of your men! Not until after the fight this morning did I—I learn certain things. Now you can go. I just didn't want you to believe a Devine could be a thief and a killer like—"

"The Benders!" he finished for her. "You're a liar, Daisy. Not very good at that. You're trying to help that damned Uncle Raul do something, and whatever it is it's dirty." He was rising to his feet as he spoke. His hat came up, went back on his head. "I'll go now. Just remember what I told you this morning, Beautiful. Something about pretty shoes being placed under my bed with your own little lily-white hands."

"Don't!" She tried to get away as his hands suddenly reached for her. The big chair she had been sitting in was right behind her. It stopped her, his scooping hands coming on and around her, his arms pinning her arms to her sides. In a fierce crush she was against him, all of her pressed tight against him. "You—you're mad!"

"If you have any gunmen in that bedroom," he said right in her face, "you'd better damned quick call them. I'm going to kiss you, Dangerous Daisy Devine."

"Don't!" She was fighting, squirming, and the more she squirmed the more her body and legs were pressed to him. "You can't—do this to me! You—you'll die for—"

"To hell with dying!" His lips covered hers, his arms twisting her, hands kneading. "Kiss me, damn you!"

"You dog!" She managed to gasp that in his face. "Bender—dog!"

"Kiss me, I said!" He held her tighter, hands pawing her. "I'll never let you go until you do, you beautiful devil! Kiss me!"

"You—you *beast!*" It was a long, long minute before she was back in her chair, looking wilted and half-lifeless, a strange daze in her eyes, the full bosom rising and falling with deep emotion. "I want to shoot your heart out now!"

"Strange that you don't at least try to go for that pretty six-shooter hidden low against your stomach." He laughed at her, stepping to one side to pick up his hat that had dropped from his head to the floor in their short but fierce struggle. "I felt the damned thing."

"Get—out of—here!"

"You're not through with me yet, Daisy." He carefully brushed his hat against the velvet cuffs of his coat sleeves. "You sent for me, and surely it wasn't just for me to come here and kiss you."

"Please go now!" With a quick twist she hunched over the arm of her chair, violent sobs shaking her. "I—I can't stand the sight of you any—any longer!"

"Well, I'll be damned!" Hat cocked on his head again, he stood back, absolute amazement in his eyes. "Dangerous Daisy actually crying! Do you know"—he turned his head a little to one side—

"this is the first time I ever saw or heard of a Devine being moved to tears!"

VI

THE DISTANT whistle of an eastbound train seemed to answer Dave Bender. He ignored it for nearly a minute, standing there staring at Daisy Devine, not believing his eyes. The train was coming on. Another long and lonesome wail came from the locomotive. A brass bell began ringing, a musical *cling-clang-ing* beginning to fill the town. He turned to the window, and looked through a crack in the curtains.

It was a double-header, two stout and sturdy-looking engines on the end of what seemed a mile-long string of cattle cars. Blue clouds of smoke marked a third locomotive back beyond the middle of the train. Suddenly he turned and stared back at Daisy Devine. A slow, hardening curl came to his lips.

She was sitting up straight in her chair again. Sparkling tears were clinging to her cheeks, the wings of her nostrils were flaring. In her eyes was something startling. He saw them glaring, for a moment the eyes of a woman gone mad, then he knew that her staring and glaring were terror.

"Would that train, now" —he jerked a thumb toward the window— "have anything to do with the reason for you sending for me, Daisy?"

"N-o-o, David!" Her hand came out clawlike toward him, terror mounting in her face and eyes. "Please sit back down in your chair!"

"You're a damned poor actress, Daisy." He glanced back at the window, then swung a chair between them, put-

Lawsuits on the Lode

FEW localities have been the scene of more litigation than the historic mining camp of Virginia City, Nevada. Most of this trouble, ironically, stemmed from the honesty of V. A. Houseworth, early-day Virginia City blacksmith, who believed that all men's integrity matched his own.

Following his election as district mining recorder, Houseworth immediately sub-let his duties to a paper-backed record book kept parked on a local bar. Upon staking his claim, each miner personally recorded its boundaries in the book, generally in pencil. If subsequent developments showed that a change of claim boundaries would be advantageous, the claimant had only to erase his original filing and substitute the new bounds. On a few occasions, miners are known to have erased and altered the stipulated boundaries of another's claim.

The original claims at Virginia City were recorded so haphazardly that only a Philadelphia lawyer could form any accurate idea of the property involved. The Yellow Jacket mine, slated to become one of the world's richest producers of silver and gold was recorded in this manner:

"We, the undersigned claim Twelve Hundred (1200) feet of this Quartz Vain including all of its dips and spurs commencing at Houseworth Claim, and running north including twenty-five feet of surface on each side of the Vain. This Vain is known as the Yellow Jacket Vain. Taken up on May 1st, 1859. Recorded June 27th, 1859. H. B. Camp, John Bishop, J. F. Rogers."

In view of such questionable ownership it is not remarkable that once the mines had begun pouring forth a bounty of $36,000,000 annually, lawsuits flourished like toadstools in a meadow.

During the process of harvesting their fabulous ore crop, the Comstock's twelve leading mines were parties to 245 separate lawsuits. Attorney's fees rising out of title fights mounted to more than $15,000,000, the largest single fee having been the $165,000 which the Belcher company paid to Attorney Wm. M. Stewart, later United States Senator from Nevada.

—*Nell Murbarger*

ting his foot on it, elbow on his knee and his chin in his upturned palm. "Maybe I should have said a poor liar. You brought me here to stall me, knowing my men would drop everything and center their attention on this hotel. If seven cyclones swept through this town they wouldn't see or hear them as long as I remained inside here. Thanks, anyway, Daisy." He smiled as he brought his foot back to the floor. "I at least had a chance to do something I've wanted to do since childhood. I took Daisy Devine in my arms and kissed her. She fought me, but surely not as much as she could have. You didn't even try pulling your fancy little six-shooter on me."

"Don't try to leave this room, David!" With a swirl of her skirts she was suddenly out of her chair, barring the way as he headed for the door. "Don't go back down that hall and down those stairs!"

"Daisy, darling" —he held out his arms— "you're really pulling the roof down on my head now!"

"I can't—go on!" Suddenly she was in his arms, her glorious head against his wide chest. Her hands slid around him, passing the six-shooters in his waistband, her fingers locking together behind his back. "I'm the last Devine! You're the last Bender! I—I can't see you die, no matter how hard I've tried in the past!"

"All right, Daisy, all right." He stood there holding her, patting her back, arms tight around her. "My father always said there would have been no feud between the Benders and the Devines if the dirty Scanlins had kept their brazen lying and scheming out of it. In spite of all our fighting, and all the death that's come between us, I've loved you all these years, Daisy."

"I know, David, I know!" she sobbed. "Always when they set their traps to kill you I prayed inside, regardless of what my lips might have been saying. Something told me you would always come through their gunsmoke."

"And I lied to myself about you, too." He smiled for a moment. "I did hate you. I hated you because of this damned Bender-Devine feud. Maybe now Wyoming is going to do great things for us. I'll go now, but I'm coming back."

"No, David, please!" She surged back from him, a wild light in her tear-wet eyes. "Even if he kills me or has me killed I've got to stop somewhere. Uncle Raul has gambled away every dollar that came from my cattle. He told me about it only today after the fight. Even our hotel bill is long overdue. That trainload of cattle going through is from Buffalo Bend, ninety miles west of us. He hopes to have the money for it in the next few days."

HIS SMILE was broader. "And the cattle on that train belong to one Dave Bender, don't they, honey?"

"Yes, David." Her head came back to his chest. "Yours!"

"Ours, Daisy!" His arms tightened. "There's a new partnership now. You're going to be mine, and what's mine is yours. Let me go now."

"No, David!" She was suddenly fighting to hold him back. "Go out the window if you must go, but not back down the stairs!"

"Remember one thing, Daisy." He lifted her from the floor and stood her to one side. "You know I always come through the smoke. Stand there now while I open the door."

Six-shooter filling his right hand, he unlocked it, swung it wide, waiting for a second. With her watching him in terror, both hands clamped to her mouth as if to hold back a scream, he stepped forward. A small shadow stirred in the shadows ahead. Instantly the cocked six-shooter covered it. A low, startled voice caused it to swing up, thumb over the hammer to make certain it did not fall.

"Mr. Bender!" the voice whispered, and he saw the little black bellboy gliding swiftly to him and without a sound on the deep carpeting of the hall. "Don't go down them stairs! Three mens are

waiting for you down there. Let me show 'em to you."

"Show me, son."

The hallway widened around the head of the stairs. Beyond the stairs was a brass-railed opening in the floor that was a long well above the rear of the lobby. Keeping close to the wall at his right the bellboy led the way to it. With big eyes that looked like white marbles in the black face he stopped and pointed downward, voice a mere breath.

"On the big leather sofa behind the purty palm trees."

Bender stole a look downward, conscious that a white-faced and breathless girl was watching him from the other end of the hall with a big bay window behind her. Below him, right under the rear railing of the well, three burly men were huddled together on a big cowhide couch. Between them and the foot of the stairs stood a large cluster of artificial palms, ample shelter to hide them from anyone coming down from the floor above.

He stepped back, looking around. Behind him a heavy table stood against the wall. Slipping his six-shooters back in his waistband he handed the little bellhop a twenty-dollar gold coin, and wiggled a finger for him to get going and keep out of the way. Then he turned and carefully picked up the heavy table, slowly lifting it above his head.

To the three gunmen below and everybody else who saw it, it must have looked as if a section of the roof were falling. The table came straight down. The gunmen were right under it, heads still close together. In its flat fall, legs extended upward, the table caught three heads as one, bounced with the noise of a big drum struck a single blow, and clattered as if turning to wreckage as it glanced onto the floor.

Almost instantly another shadow was coming down, straight-legged, arms up, a six-shooter in each hand—something of a fashion plate falling through the air. He struck the big couch on his feet, bounced, shot forward, and landed like a dancer completing a leap on the thick rug.

"My God!" wailed little Mr. Pooley, bald head sinking behind the counter that was the hotel desk. "This is awful!"

Dave Bender took one look at the three men on the floor, knocked as cold as dead frogs by the falling table. Eyes flashing right and left, he turned and walked on. At the front of the lobby the big Negro man in blue and gold braid swung open the door, and stood back with his eyes rolling, awe in his face.

ONCE BENDER stepped off the porch he saw that he had not been forgotten. Ute Brand was leaning against the corner to his left. Horse Jefferson was to his right. The rest of his men, he knew, had ducked back out of sight. He saw Push McCoy conveniently leaning against a hitch-rack twenty paces beyond Ute Brand, and walked straight to him.

"Howdy, Marshal!" He was smiling now. "I take it that you're like most of these frontier marshals, and hold a deputy United States Marshal's commission?"

"No, I don't, Mr. Bender." Push McCoy frowned. "I'm just a town clown, you might say." The frown cracked to a smile. "There is a man like that, and I don't know yet what he'd want with a commission. He's Bank Morgan, owner of the place where you're stopping."

"Come along fast!" Bender caught his arm. "Bank Morgan will soon want to be using you. This will be the first time I know of a Bender calling on the law for anything, but in this case I can't fight the entire Union Pacific Railroad Company and the United States at the same time. We'll at least start our job with Morgan."

They were there as quickly as they could walk the distance. Morgan listened, eyes becoming big and round, his smile widening. He rubbed his hands briskly, clamped a big cigar in his mouth, bit it half in two, and tossed it to one side.

"Why, hell, yes!" he agreed. "If you can prove it, Bender!"

"The cattle on the train will do that, Bank. The original brand on every left hip will be there. I used nothing else as a trail brand heading north with the herd."

"We need a United States Commissioner, and we've got him." Again Morgan rubbed his big hands, making a rough shuffling sound. "He's Judge Rooter MacTavish, sitting in the barroom right now guzzling a lot of free Scotch and soda, a daily pastime with the old cuss. Have your men take a quick look at the cattle on the train."

Ute Brand and the others had followed to the Land of Joy. A few words sent them hurrying away to the tracks. The train had to lose thirty or forty minutes in Hell Creek Crossing while the three engines took on wood and water for the eighty-mile run on to Lock Jaw, the next town to eastward. Brand was galloping back like a winded horse within five minutes after he had left the doorway.

"Dead right!" he cried, his eyes shining. "'Course it'd take hours to look at all of the critters aboard. But our big D B brand stands out as wide and high as a covered wagon on every hip I could see!"

They needed to find only a few stolen cattle on the train to halt it. With an order signed by fat and ruddy-faced old Judge Rooter MacTavish, Bank Morgan was in a hurry to get to the depot. In no time at all after that Hell Creek Crossing was teeming with new excitement. Not a man in town had ever seen an entire train ordered into a sidetrack and its cargo of cattle unloaded in the mile-long string of pens stretching below the depot.

"I always liked to raise hell!" Glee still filled Bank Morgan after he had served his papers on the depot agent. "Now the wires are starting their hum and there'll be the devil to pay. Where's Mr. Raul Scanlin, Push?" He turned to the town marshal. "Judge MacTavish wants to see the gentleman. He was writing out a warrant for him when I buzzed off to the depot."

"Give me the warrant and I'll lock him up, Bank."

"No, you won't!" Again the big smile was all over Bank Morgan's face and he rubbed his hands with that rough shuffling sound. "Two long years ago when I was asked to take that fool deputy marshal commission I didn't know what I'd do with it. Seems like it's turning out to be an unearned pleasure for Morgan. I'll serve *that* warrant!"

VII

MY GOD, Daisy, you can't do this to me! I'm your own flesh and blood! You can't doublecross your dear, dead mother and your father and—and your brothers in their graves!"

Raul Scanlin was scared. This was something he had never been up against before. Bank Morgan had been to the hotel twice within an hour asking for him. Push McCoy and the two big night marshals were down on the board sidewalk, keeping an eye on the front of the hotel. Others would probably be watching it from the rear.

The long cattle train was on the sidetrack down by the cattle pens. Car doors had been opened, cattle had poured down into the pens, and nine out of ten of the devilish steers in the lot were carrying Dave Bender's big D B brand on their left hips.

Raul Scanlin was sweating now, not merely perspiring. Great beads welled out on his forehead, his neck and face. His collar had wilted to a sagging wet ring. Even his big handkerchief dripped as he sat there mopping, hat on the floor beside him as he argued with his niece.

In the past there had been hundreds of quarrels with her. None had been as desperate as this. Right now his very life was in danger. He still had eighteen men here who were supposed to be on the pay-roll. Most of them had reasons to take sides against him because they

were dead-broke and he owed them money.

"The Bender-Devine feud is over, Uncle Raul." Daisy was damnably cool about it, not giving an inch. "There really never was a Bender-Devine feud. It should have been called a Bender-Scanlin. The Scanlins began it, nursed it, fed the fires of killing and hatred with an unending stream of lies and tricks, and—"

"You're accusing your own mother," he gasped, "when you talk like that, Daisy! Your own dear, beautiful dead mother!"

"Uncle Raul." —a cold smile moved her lips— "I've been a fool in your hands long enough. I'm through. It's time I had something else out of life."

"We will have once we come out of this!" he cried, handkerchief mopping and dripping. "I must have a little quick money right now."

"Money!" She almost laughed. "I have none!"

"Damn it," he snarled, "we could borrow some on a few of your mother's jewels, Daisy!"

She nodded. "I knew it was coming back to that. To make certain you wouldn't take them out of my trunk when my back was turned I have them downstairs in the hotel strongbox for safe-keeping. If you're arrested let Spring and Ashby, the cattle buyers, get you out of jail. They're the biggest crooks in town and deep in politics here."

"By God, I will!" he cried, a bull lunging to his feet. "And—and if I go to jail, you'll go with me! After all, my dear," —he suddenly laughed— "I'm only working for you. Yes, that's right!" He stooped and grabbed up his hat. "As damned stupid as you are, you can come out with a brilliant idea now and then."

She watched him go stamping out, banging the door behind him. He would not dare leave the hotel just yet, but he was going to do something, make some swift and drastic move that was always a part of him. She moved closer to the window, and sat there watching. After five minutes of watching she nodded, seeing Washington Lee, the little black bellboy, racing along the sidewalk to a red-brick two-story that was the town's new bank.

Upstairs in the Great Far Western were the offices of Spring & Ashby, cattle buyers, railroad land agents, and just about anything else one could call to mind in Wyoming. Washington Lee was gone only a few minutes, walking slowly as he returned, his job done. He was no more than back inside the lobby before two rather quick-stepping men were coming out of the door that led upstairs in the bank building.

IRA SPRING and Lars Ashby were often mistaken for brothers. They were big, bull-chested men with short, dark beards, their faces always stiff with their own importance. Dressed almost alike in hard-woven dark suits, derbies sitting squarely on their heads, they walked like soldiers keeping step, each carrying under his left arm a flat black case filled with legal papers.

Rated the slickest and most unscrupulous lawyers on the frontier, they were the guiding hands behind the new bank, ruthlessly grabbing all the business they could from the Wyoming Frontier Trader, the more staid and cautious bank toward the east end of the street. Hogs when it came to buying cattle, they were worse when it came to prosecuting or defending a man or woman in court.

Like soldiers they turned into the Kentucky Belle. Just as they had time to reach the front door the west end of the street was filled with a sudden wild yelling and hooting. Startled for a second, the watching girl in the big bay window stepped back a pace, staring at the oncoming rush of horsemen.

Dust boiling, horses snorting, bearded and buckskinned riders reeling in their saddles, it was like a wild band of hell's angels suddenly bursting into town. There were more than twenty of them,

unwashed for months except by the rains and blowing gales on the prairies, some of them smelling to the high heaven, they might have been bandits pouring in to terrorize and rob the town.

Six-shooters were suddenly popping, the yells and howling rising higher and higher. With their dust blotting out everything in suffocating clouds lifting a mile behind them and filling the street, they galloped on by the Kentucky Belle, such a place with its fine fixings and cleanliness to be scorned by such a rough and rowdy gang bursting in on Hell River Crossing.

Glory Road had little to tickle the appetites and satisfy the tough hearts of most of the men in such a crowd. It was too stiff-necked, too damned fancy, the women slow and burdened with those paw-me-not-in-public airs. South of the tracks waited their meat, their blood and potatoes, women and gals who could toss off drink for drink with the toughest buffalo hunter, and out-cuss the best muleskinner or bullwhacker.

The blazing six-shooters and the thunder of hoofs had told folks south of the tracks that business was about to be suddenly on the boom. Screams of glee, waving hands and outstretched arms were already calling for the fun from windows and doorways, and along the broken and warped sidewalks lined with lopsided hitch-racks marked with knife and bullet scars from a thousand fights.

Daisy Devine had slammed down her windows to keep out the dust, and watched the yelling and shooting horsemen go pouring on across the tracks. Pulling up at the hitch-racks they were like cawing crows and screaming eagles, flying out of their saddles. Buckskinned arms pawed figures in calico to brawny bosoms, sweeping women off the ground, lips puckering out of mattresses of beards to find the softer and generally hairless lips of their willing greeters.

Dust over Glory Road blotted out the sight behind the dirty-gray clouds. Glory Road was deserted, doors having been banged closed, windows slammed down, everybody having to flee from the street to find a place where it was possible to breathe.

What was going on downstairs between Raul Scanlin and the two sharp lawyer-cattle buyers was a mystery to Daisy Devine. Scanlin had rooms off the rear of the lobby, always one for the pretentious. His blinds would be carefully drawn, and inside his suite things would be happening.

It could not have been longer than fifteen minutes before Daisy saw the two stiff, soldierlike figures leave the hotel. With most of the dust settled they walked with squared shoulders, heading straight for the Land of Joy, men who knew their business and were going to take the bull by the horns.

RAUL SCANLIN rapped firmly on his niece's door a few minutes later. She had not locked it, and before she could turn a wrench of the knob was opening the door. There he stood, the cocksure Raul Scanlin again. He had changed his shirt and coat, dabbing more powder to his temples to add dignity to the arrogant face.

"All right, Daisy!" He stepped on inside and closed the door behind him. "You can hold on to your damned dear mother's fine jewels. I always said your father and brothers stole most of them on raids across the Border. But no argument there, now." He shrugged and a big smile spread across his face. "It is never for long that any man can worry Raul Scanlin. The tables have turned, and of course, my dear," —his expression was more of a leer than a smile— "you are just dying to know what I have done to put myself in such good spirits?"

"I am not remotely interested," she lied, looking at him steadily. "I was just thinking of what you said about my dead mother. Now that the great lion seems to have his tail out of a crack—"

"Pay no attention to that!" He waved his hands and laughed, a short, jarring sound. "I can well afford to forget

things. Within the next thirty minutes a warrant supposely issued for one Raul Scanlin will be torn up, and another issued for a Mr. David Bender. I remember, you see" —he shrugged— "that you seem rather fond of the 'David' part."

"What have you done?"

"The rest, my dear" —he bowed mockingly— "is what may be construed as none of your damned business. It is a matter between gentlemen."

VIII

BANK MORGAN was sweating and chewing a fat cigar to a pulp when he came upstairs. "I've just signed a bond for you, Bender! You're arrested and Raul Scanlin's not!"

"Go ahead with it!" Bender stared at him, the others in the room pop-eyed and speechless. "I'm entitled to the worst, I know. This is the first time I ever let myself go to law with anything but a forty-five, and I need to be reminded that Raul Scanlin could be no worse than law itself. What's happened?"

"Give me a drink before I choke!"

Morgan walked on to the table, pouring himself a stiff one. All of the Benders riders watched him in silence as he lifted his glass and slowly downed a full five ounces of hundred proof Bourbon.

He had been upstairs only a short time before, rubbing his hands with that shuffling sound, a big grin on his face. He had furnished men to unload the cattle train, merely sending out word for them. They were still over there guarding the cattle pens, a rough, tough bunch of about fifteen kept in fine spirits with four jugs of Bank Morgan whisky.

"Running true to the general form of public parasites," Morgan said, pouring another big drink, "that damned old carrion crow downstairs reversed himself, and apologized to Spring and Ashby."

"And who," asked Bender, "are Spring and Ashby. I never heard of them."

"Lawyers!" Bank Morgan turned and spat violently on the floor. "Gentlemen of the bar, they call themselves! Cattle buyers, bankers, legalized thieves, lice —and buzzards, plucking on the carcass of the human race. They own the cattle on that train! Raul Scanlin was only in their employ when he had them shipped out of Buffalo Bend."

His second drink stood on the table as he waved his hands in a gesture of hopelessness.

"I'm no lawyer, you see, Dave," he went on. "Neither is that damned old Rooter MacTavish. He knows somebody back in Washington who was probably glad to see him go West where he could be forgotten. The only law he has is in three battered old books some lawyer probably threw out a window. Listen to something that was quoted about nine times in my ear downstairs in the barroom. 'Abandoned cattle and or horses and or any other form of livestock must be construed as without legal ownership.' That's close enough. He who and or hee-haw and what-not who takes possession of such—well, hell!" He waved his hands wildly. "He owns it, such and etcetera! The etcetera part, I reckon, means the guns you're to use and the legal assasins you're to hire to hold said possessions."

"That sure was a mouth full." Ute Brand scratched his head vigorously, face a twisted grimace as he turned to the table for a drink. "I couldn't have got it out with a pick and shovel. What does it mean?"

"Damn it, Dave Bender doesn't own any cattle! He had no right to stop that train. He lied when he swore to those papers in front of His Honorable His Honor Judge Rooter MacTavish. His act has brought great and irreparable loss and damage to a transcontinental railroad, and the peace and the noble and undisputed dignity of fair and wide Wyoming!"

"And that busts the head out of the banjo!" Horse Jefferson licked his lips

and moved toward the drinks. "I just never could stand them long words that reach clear hell and 'way out yonder to come popping back and wropping round my neck. Let's all have a drink."

"Long words like that" —Ute Brand stood his emptied glass back on the table— "fills me with one of them passions supposed to sizzle in a blushing bride. I'm going downstairs and shoot just one hole in a red-nosed Scotchman's belly to see how much beer and whisky'll pour out of him. When that's done I'll be as unpassioned as a broke-down ox in a wagon train."

"The law's agin that, too, Ute." Trigger Ben Black was moving to the table. "It's always agin the decent and respectable things a man has a right to do now and then. I was run to hell out of Arkansas just because I shot my uncle."

MYSTERY SMITH came forward. "Speaking of the respectable, let Ute kill MacTavish. Nobody wants to rob Dave out of the pleasure of killing Raul Scanlin. While he's putting the works to Raul me and Whispering Jim will go kill the damn lawyers, and that'll stop everything cold in its tracks."

"Wait a minute!"

A sudden calm had come over Bank Morgan. He had stepped to the window, and was looking across the tracks at the wild gang of buffalo hunters who had come storming in a short time ago. Half of them had already gone inside the dives. The rest stood on the sidewalks or backed to the hitch-racks, women standing close to them and talking in low and coaxing tones.

"I know that bunch!—Dave"—he whirled to Bender— "hold yourself and this gang of wild mules. No cheap gang of crooks have whipped me yet in this town, and I'm damned if I'm going to let a thug like Raul Scanlin be the ringleader of the first scummy crew to rub my nose on the ground!

"Why, hell, yes!" He wheeled back to the window for another look across the tracks. "Of course I know the leader of that pack of wildcats over there! I always wind up having to get him out of jail. Hell, Dave, he's Rattlesnake Sam Gore, and just as bloody and mean as his name indicates. I'm probably the only man in the world he wouldn't shoot or cut his throat for a silver dollar."

"Thanks, Bank." Dave Bender came to his feet, face pale and hard. Only a few words had come from him in all the talking. "But I've always fought my own fights—"

"Set down and shut up!" Ute Brand took a run at him and shoved him back in his chair. "I'm beginning to like this Morgan feller." He was trying to look across the tracks. "He seems to know some mighty wonderful people. If that's the Rattlesnake Sam Gore I used to know years ago down on the Border, then he's the meanest damn man in Wyoming, and my friend to boot. . . ."

"It's a simple sheaf of papers, Mr. Scanlin." Lars Ashby's voice was low and hard as he sat at Ira Spring's right in the lamplight on the table, the big figure of Raul Scanlin bolted upright in a chair in front of them. "Your signature, and up to this point the transaction is complete and legal according to law."

Scanlin slumped back, trying to get a grip on himself. Nightfall had come, and so many things had happened. Still clinging close to the hotel he had watched the sun go down from an upstairs window. At the same time he had watched gathering dark clouds on the southwest rim, a coming storm in the making that had the world as black as tar outside. And now he faced Spring and Ashby, both as stiff-faced as ever.

Lars Ashby was doing the talking. Ira Spring had a small black bag on his lap. From it he was counting out short stacks of gold coins and placing them on the table just in front of him, the lamplight shining on them. When the last coin was in place Spring folded the bag, laid it beside the money, and spoke with thin, precise lips.

"Something you can carry it in," he

said with a smirk. "With our compliments, of course, Mr. Scanlin."

"There were thirty-six hundred head of those cattle." By a great effort Scanlin was keeping his voice steady. "Some were other strays that my men found in the general roundup and had never belonged to Dave Bender. I've told you that."

"Lost from other herds in storms, perhaps." Ashby nodded. "Little it matters, Mr. Scanlin. Your hand to the paper, your signature, and the rest, sir, is entirely up to us."

SCANLIN'S voice was a groan as he stiffened up and forward again. "Ten thousand dollars! My God, that's murder!"

"Murder, it would seem" —Ashby's smile was thin— "seems to have entered it long before you reached Hell Creek Crossing. If, of course" —he shrugged— "we are to believe the Bender side."

"And that," agreeably offered Spring, a strange sheen in his eyes that made him a tensely watching cat, "doesn't greatly concern the remainder of the issue."

"But ten thousand dollars!"

"Take it or leave it!" There was a sudden snap to Ashby's tone. "We have drawn some hot chestnuts from the fire for you, Mr. Scanlin. At the same time your niece also. Sign!"

Raul Scanlin signed, steadying his right hand by clamping his left down on his wrist. It was cool in the room, with the wind beginning to blow outside, but the beading balls of perspiration were back, beginning to slip and drip from his forehead.

IX

LIKE A MAN who had just completed some task that strained him from head to heel, Raul Scanlin slumped back in the big chair again, unmindful of the beads dripping down his face as he watched Ashby quickly pick up the papers and place them in an inside pocket of his coat.

"And now, sir" —Spring was slowly pushing forward the stacks of gold coins— "the advance, let us say."

"Advance!" Scanlin shot up straight in his chair, eyes suddenly popping. "I gave you the cattle for nothing! I want ten thousand—"

"Gently, Mr. Scanlin, gently, sir." Lars Ashby's right hand was on the table. There was no quick move. The gun must have been in his sleeve and merely dropped into his hand. It was there now, cocked and deadly, a black, two-barreled little pistol. "By only the will of two great and kindly hearts we are advancing you twenty-five hundred dollars. The papers you have just signed called for that amount. If and when we succeed in selling those cattle in Kansas City, then, sir, and in due course of time, you will receive the rest of the money." He pushed straight to his feet. "It has been a pleasure to deal with you, Mr. Scanlin."

"And the bag," murmured Spring, getting to his feet, "with our compliments, as I said, Mr. Scanlin. The next time you come north with cattle we will be most delighted to deal with you."

Wilted in the chair, strength gone out of him, Scanlin watched them go, leaving the gold shining on the table in front of him. There was not one thing he could do, not one thing he could say. He was a fish the sharks had taken. The gold they had left would be all he would ever get if he angered them. Maybe it was all he would ever get anyway.

"Hell!" He shot up straight again, strength surging back, eyes glaring as he stared all over the table. "They didn't leave me a single scrap of paper to show—"

"Yes, Mr. Manly." The voice and the opening of the door cut him short. "My uncle will take care of it now, I am sure."

Daisy Devine was coming in. Just behind her was the big, square-jawed Mr. Manly, owner of the hotel. Behind Manly, timid as always, was little and bald

Mr. Pooley, the clerk. In Pooley's hands was a long slip of paper that was an overdue hotel bill.

"As I said," Daisy Devine went on, smiling her sweetest, an all-knowing glint in those sea-green eyes, "Uncle Raul always attends to such matters. Uncle" —her big eyes were filled with angelic innocence as she turned them on him— "would you mind, darling?"

"Mind—mind—" Something seemed to be gagging him. "What?"

"The hotel bill, sir," said Manly, taking it from Pooley and laying it on the table in front of Scanlin beside the stacks of gold. "It is a matter of slightly more than seven hundred and twenty dollars to date. You took some cash, you see, sir, from the clerk several times. It is all properly itemized."

"Why—why, yeah." Scanlin nodded, limp hand waving. "Just take it from the pile, please."

Slumped in his chair he watched the money go, Manly needing no second invitation. Seven short stacks were gingerly placed to one side, five twenty-dollar coins in each stack. The last move of the hand took a single coin, and Manly stepped back.

"We'll call it seven-twenty, even," he intoned. "Right, sir?"

There was a nod from the man in the chair. Manly picked up the money, and dropped the bill marked "Paid" on the table. The three turned and left the room. In the doorway Daisy Devine looked back. For an instant there was something akin to pity in her eyes, then she was gone, the door closing, the latch of the lock sounding.

IT HURT. Everything hurt now. This was the end of easy riches, a dream of greatness that would never come. Up here in this wide and wild Wyoming country Raul Scanlin had had many plans to become rich and powerful. Ruthless on the way north as always, grabbing everything in sight, he had had everything when landing here. Gambling tables had always been his curse, and he had found them here, staring him in the face at every hand, money going at the spin of every wheel or the turn of a card, everything against him.

A low rattle at the window brought him to his feet. Quickly he scooped the money before him into the stout bag and tightened its drawstring as another rattle sounded at the window. With it this time there was a deep rumbling, making the entire hotel tremble, the rumbling growing until it was like low artillery firing. He stepped to the window, plucked back the blind, and peered outside just as a sudden beat of rain hammered against the panes in huge globules.

Lightning flashed before he turned away from the window. For a moment everything was bright and golden from earth to sky. Overhead he saw the milling and tossing black clouds. In the quick blackness that followed it seemed that tons of water were pouring against the panes.

"All right, damn it," he growled, "let it storm!"

And then Paul Scanlin heard something else that was not a sound made by a storm of the elements. It was a reverberating ripping that was like a long, long plank being torn and splintered from the side of a house. Before it could die away in the stormy night another sound just like it was coming, then more and more, and fierce yells were lifting in the distance.

"Shots!" He turned and looked round-eyed at his reflection in a large mirror on the wall. "There's a hell of a fight somewhere!"

He started to leave the room, getting as far as the door, and suddenly turned back, hugging his little bag of gold. The noise was growing higher and higher as if the entire town was engaging in a free-for-all battle out there in the blackness of the lashing wind and rain. He had no business outside in a time like this! Dave Bender and his gang would be out there. Hell, there was never a fight without Dave

Bender and his fighting Texans getting into it!

His wait was not long. He heard racing footsteps, the swishing of rain capes. Before he could jump back to his door and lock it the door was flying open. Into the doorway, dripping wet, water pouring from their capes, loomed the white-faced figures of Lars Ashby and Ira Spring. Like scared mules they came right on in, Spring whirling to close and lock the door behind them.

"We've got to have your help, Scanlin!" panted Ashby. "You and every man you have and can get! Bender's taking those cattle out of the pens! If he runs away in this storm we'll never be able to recover them!"

"And that means," put in Spring, his voice trembling now, "you'll have to move damned fast, Scanlin!"

"Take chairs, gentlemen." Raul Scanlin was never cooler in his life. "Seems to be rather wet and blowing out tonight."

"Don't plank yourself down in that chair!" Ashby jumped toward him, his wet fists lifted. "We've got to hurry, damn you!"

"Sit *down!*" The command was like an overbearing master speaking to his dogs. "Don't bark at me! I have eighteen fighting men in this town who'll go to hell for me, but not a damned one would lift a hand for you two or throw a bucket of water on your tail if your hind ends were afire! Sit, I tell you, *sit!*"

"If we lose the cattle, Scanlin," Ashby was trying to argue across the table, "you won't get another dollar from us!"

"Interesting, isn't it?"

CALMLY, taking all the time he wanted to take, Scanlin drew a cigar from his pocket, sitting there as if studying it, rolling it in his fingers, ignoring them completely. As if holding their breaths they slumped into chairs, the noise of the shooting and fighting in the distance growing.

Ashly spoke. "You can help, Scanlin!"

"In this room not long ago"—Scanlin was beginning to smile, eyes still on the rolling cigar in his fingers—"I was supposed to get ten thousand dollars. Don't say you'll pay me. You won't. I know it. I'm in no mood for your lying." There was a pause, then: "Now get out!"

"Scanlin, please!" Ira Spring was on his feet, leaning over the table, hands suddenly outstretched. Always the second-fiddle before when it came to talking, he was pleading now. "God knows I didn't want Lars to beat you down like he did! I wanted you to have a better deal—"

"Deal, hell!" Raul Scanlin bounced to his feet, hurling the cigar to one side. All of a sudden he was back to himself, no longer the beaten and cowering dog. This was the Raul Scanlin these two hungry wolves had never known before, the fighting man coming out to stand his ground. "Deals are always rotten with your kind! You'd steal the eyeballs out of your own mothers' heads! Any court that allows things like you in it is a dirty mockery.

"Lawyers!" He laughed at them. "Damn you, you're up limbs now and have no legalized killers to back your dirty play. You pulled the wool over Judge MacTavish's eyes, and laughed about it. The rest of the law in this town won't lift a finger to help you. Few of the gunmen you've hired in the past to help in your crooked deals will have a thing to do with you. The lawyers who beat and cheated them! The two honorable gentlemen of the bar who—"

"Please, Scanlin!" Ira Spring looked ready to sink to his knees. "Say what you want! I'll give it! To hell with Lars!"

"I want exactly ten thousand dollars brought into this room tonight." His voice was suddenly low and grinding. "With what I have it will make half of the twenty-five thousand dollars I was going to get for fifty thousand dollars' worth of cattle. That's the figure we started to do business on. We'll tear

up that damned paper I signed. I'll have half my money tonight, and the other half when the cattle herd is safe and back in those pens for a quick sale.

"See that old army bugle lying on the dresser." He pointed to it, a battered brass thing that seemed to have no place at all in this big and richly furnished room. "I can take that thing, raise the window, and blow a certain tune out into the storm. In a few minutes this room will be jammed full, and every man a fighting man. Those men have to see money." His laugh was low and silky now. "The tale has gone the rounds that I'm broke. A gleaming pile of gold on this table will change their minds. Gold, the stuff your guts cry and ache for! The stuff that buys women and song and—"

"Don't go on, Scanlin!" Lars Ashly lifted his hands. "The bank is closed tonight. Tomorrow morning—"

"Damn that!" Ira Spring swung half-around, leering in his face. "He knows we have the combination of the safe, you fool! Time's flying! Listen to those guns! We can't wait! This—this big crook holds a royal flush on us, Lars!"

"I'm damned if he doesn't," gagged Ashby. "You—you win, Scanlin. Damn your soul to hell!"

X

ROOTEY, old hog, old buzzard, old gut, old tank, you're a bellyful of booze, and—and a no good swoosh!"

The party was getting rough in the big dining room in the Land of Joy. without knowing why, Judge Rooter McTavish seemed to be the guest of honor at a long table in the rear end of the room where all the window blinds were carefully drawn and draped.

Nothing so sumptuous and so glorious as this had ever happened to him in Hell Creek Crossing. Bess the Babe, the prettiest little redhead in the place, sat cuddled close to him on the left arm of the large leather overstuffed that had been pushed to the head of the table for him. Little Jennie O'Riley with her gleaming black braids was on the right arm, her pretty feet crowded down between his legs with the feet of Bess the Babe.

Each girl wore a dinner gown cut so low His Honor had to hold his nose high to keep it out of trouble. They tweeked the nose, tickled his ears and patted his belly, whispering things only His Honor was supposed to hear. The more Scotch and soda, the more sparkling and bubbling champagne they poured into him, the more he could take.

Bank Morgan was the only one at the table who was really getting drunk. Dave Bender and his stiff crew were drinking a little of everything that came along, and yet each man was holding himself. High society was not a palatable dish to rough and ready fighting men like scowling old Ute Brand and the others.

A man to do things in a big way, Bank Morgan had invited too many to the feast he had so suddenly decided to give tonight. All the supposedly important in town except Spring and Ashby seemed to be here to enjoy the good food and the endless flowing bottles.

Dave Bender's men seemed sorely out of place, not quite knowing what to do with all the sparkling silver and fancy dishware. When the finger bowls were brought each man had solemnly taken a sip, and just as solemnly placed it back on the table, not quite accustomed to the flavor of the queer drink.

Introductions had been awkward. Ute Brand had cursed the proceedings under his breath right after banging his forehead against some bowing little runt's head during all the handshaking. There was no damned use in a man getting a knock-down to every man in the house when he would probably not remember a fourth of them tomorrow.

Dave Bender and Bank Mongan had secrets up their sleeves, and the Texas roughnecks had been kept in the dark. Never before had Dave led them into anything like this. Hell fire, it was too

much like putting everybody on a stage and having half the town come in to take a free look at them!

"You all right, Rootey, old hog, old boar?" Bank Morgan was behind the judge again and hung over the top of his chair. "You like our little party and all my friends?"

"Indeed, sir, I am honored by a most gracious host whose royal entertainment—" The judge was trying to rise as if about to make a speech, but the girls were holding him back. "I thank you, sir, from the bottom—"

"Of your belly, sure, Rootey, sure!" Morgan banged him on the back with on affectionate slap. "If the railroad company owned your belly they could use it for a watering tank! Drink up, my friend, the night is young and the girls beautiful!"

SAD BUT TRUE

A cowboy who hailed from Mesquite,
Once attempted a daredevil feat—
Without knowing how,
He rode a wild cow,
And now he must stand up to eat!

—Tex Mumford

No one seemed to know that a storm was blowing outside. Music from the ten-piece orchestra grouped in the center of the room had been loud enough at times to drown the noise of a herd of wild horses if they had suddenly charged in.

When the shots came reverberating through the house it was something all of them could understand. Bender men began to rise. He frowned them back into their seats.

UTE BRAND was the first to make the faint indication of a nod of understanding, his old eyes sparkling. Soon the others were sitting back, amused cats in their chairs, ghosts of smiles on their hard lips.

"What is it!" Judge MacTavish made a swing like something water-logged, trying to rise. Bess the Babe and Little Jennie O'Riley held him back. "It—it's a fight!"

"Just a pistol-warming, Rootey!" Morgan had moved away from him. Turning, he was looking back, grinning. "Lots of buffalo hunters in town, and they always boom things up. Keep your seat and enjoy yourself!"

"You're pulling something, Morgan!" Again the judge tried to get up. "Damn it, you have never actually liked me and—"

"Shame on you, you big sweet thing!" Bess the Babe clamped her jeweled hand over his mouth. "Babe's big sugar pie—"

"Damn it!" He pawed the hand away. "Morgan, everybody at this table was brought here to be a witness—"

"Honey Boy!" The O'Riley girl clamped her hand over his mouth this time. "Don't get drunk and mean!"

"I'm not even half-drunk!" Again he had freed his mouth from a cupping hand. "Bank Morgan's got something up his sleeve!"

"My arm, sure, sure, Honey Boy!" Morgan was laughing at him. "And how well that name fits you! Gentlemen, gentlemen"—he turned to the mob at the table—"meet Honey Boy!"

Men were yelling outside, the shooting coming nearer. Rattlesnake Sam Gore and his rough crowd never did anything quietly. Bank Morgan had taken his men away from the cattle pens. The depot agent and Spring and Ashby had managed to rake up about fifteen, most of them hangons and bartowels, only a few professional fighting men among them, and none able to stand long in what was happening to them.

"You're having those cattle pens emptied!" Flinging a woman to right and left, the judge managed to get to his feet, face so red it looked as if every blood vessel was about to burst. "That's why you gave this dinner! You're making an alibi for this damned Dave Bender and his men! You're insulting me!"

"Honey Boy! Honey Boy!" With a now angry girl at either side he was flung back in the chair. "Keep your shirt-tail down!"

Bank Morgan had handled everything, doing it in his own way and refusing to let Dave Bender have one word to say. This was his chance, his one big opportunity to seize certain power that had always been denied him in Hell Creek Crossing.

"Spring and Ashby are the bullies of the town," he had explained. "Most people hate them, but they have never been stopped at anything they have tried. Push McCoy is the only man who can win a local election. They run the rest of it, lifting the taxes at every meeting of the town council, and adding more restrictions to people trying to run a business. You can't build a hen-roost without their knowing, and having their fingers in it somewhere. They're land agents for the railroad company, and the company is behind them. When they want to steal an election the company runs in a couple of train-loads of no-goods from Buffalo Bend and Lock Jaw the day before the voting, and Ashby and Spring sit in their damned new bank grinning at us fools trying to beat them with an honest election."

A man could not help liking Bank Morgan, and Dave Bender had sat back to wait, holding his riders in line when they would have preferred a shooting war. Now they were nervously twisting and squirming in their chairs—race horses itching and prancing for the signal for a dead-heat to begin.

The gunfire, the cursing and yelling out in the storm had risen as high as it could. Shattering glass fell somewhere, an intended or stray bullet smashing it to bits. The noise of planks being ripped from the sides of cattle pens joined it, some of it remindful of the dying lament of hogs and pigs getting their throats cut. Into that came the bawling of scared cattle.

BENDER men kept twisting and turning. Judge MacTavish was still trying to argue with Bank Morgan, and Morgan was only laughing at him. Able to stand it just so long, Ute Brand kicked back his chair, moved to Bender and leaned over him to whisper in his ear.

"For God's sake," he growled, "let us go upstairs and get out of these damn town duds and into some clothes we can ride in. All of us bought some new buckskins same as you did."

"All right, but one thing, Ute. Come straight back here."

It was enough. Brand nodded to the others. They came up as one, and in a line they were leaving the room. In a few minutes they were returning, one buckskinned figure after another, heavy gun-belts sagging, with no attempt to hide the weapons.

"Look at them!" croaked MacTavish, shaking his fist. "Damn it, Morgan, they're ready for their saddles!"

"You're drunk, Rootey, old boy!"

"I'm not drunk!" wailed the judge. "Damn it, Morgan, this is an insult to Federal law! To—to the Stars and Stripes! To even the President of the United States!"

"Send him a bottle with my compliments, Rootey!"

It was then that a darting, rain-dripping little figure in blue popped into the room, and came to a sliding halt on the highly polished floor. It was Washington Lee, the bellhop from the Kentucky Belle. His eyes centered on Bender, and he scurried to him to whisper something in his ear.

XI

DAVE BENDER left the table a few moments later. He fired Ute Brand a

stay-put signal, and whispered something to Morgan as he passed the saloon man. As Washington Lee scurried away, richer by another gold coin, Dave headed for the stairs. Up there, leaning against his door, he found Daisy waiting for him in a dripping raincape.

"I had to come!" she whispered. "The clerk told me this was your room. Let's get inside quickly."

He unlocked the door, and she went in ahead of him, immediately moving forward to lower the wick of the lamp on the table. Then she turned on him, flinging her wet cape aside.

"Now"—she tried to smile—"you know I'm crazy, don't you!"

"Daisy"—swiftly he put his arms around her—"all I know is that you're here. Little else can matter to me! You—"

"Listen, David!" She pushed back, lifting her hand. "He's calling for his men! That means he has money!"

Bender heard it then, and it was a sound he had heard to his sorrow before. It was a bugle, its sharp notes coming through the storm and the hellish noise from the direction of the cattle pens. On the trail in the dead of night and in storms he had heard that bugle, and it was the same infernal call, a triple-tongued version of Boots and Saddles that might have been done by an expert cavalry trumpeter to hurry troops into action.

"I heard them through the door," Daisy hurried on as a short break came in the calling. "He had his way, after all. Now his men will soon be flocking around him. They think it is you taking the cattle, and they'll follow the herd and—"

"Nothing matters now, Daisy." He took her back into his arms. "We think we know what we're doing. Just tell me this. Will your uncle and the two damned cow buyers go with the men?"

"Uncle Raul, yes." She nodded, hands against his chest. "That is, he said he would. I can't tell what Spring and Ashby will do."

"They'll go, too, if they have any cash at stake! But let them go, Daisy." His eyes narrowed. "Something tells me they won't come back."

"David"—her voice was low—"you might not come back, either, and that's why I came here. There has been enough blood and death in our lives. It is all we've ever had. Today after the fight all hate went out of me. Uncle Raul said terrible things. He made some terrible admissions and threats when I refused to give up mother's jewels to pay the hotel bill and let him have gambling money until he could get the pay for that train-load of cattle."

"What matters anything, Daisy?" He pulled her back to him. "Just don't ask me not to ride tonight with the few men I have left."

"They'll kill you, David!"

"Maybe, Daisy." He was suddenly smiling. "I was born to die with my boots on. Stay here and wait for me. Yes, in this room! Morgan will see that you get your belongings."

"No, Dave." She cut him off by suddenly pushing away from him. "By this time, surely, you might know that a Devine never half-way makes a decision. It's all the way or not at all. Perhaps you haven't noticed"—she glanced downward at herself—"I came here in boots and spurs, and with divided skirts. If you leave this hotel tonight, and of course you will, then for the first time in all the years a Bender and a Devine will ride together."

"Hell Bender—Dangerous Daisy!" He grabbed her, pulling her back to him. "Honey, they'll never believe it in Texas!"

BANK MORGAN managed everything until the last moment. Good horses were saddled and ready in stables behind the Land of Joy. On every saddle hung a rifle and belts of cartridges covered with a slicker. Taking care of the horses and waiting in the darkness were three men Morgan could trust with his life. Two others were out in the storm,

watching the rain swish and pour, and everything that moved, one returning now and then to report to the three men in the stables.

Even when the last of the shots had died away drinks were still being poured at the banquet table. MacTavish was still there, fat and sloppy drunk and gibbering in his chair. The two beauties had deserted him. They preferred the company of two clean-cut and far younger men, one of them the bookkeeper, and the other a cashier in the Wyoming Frontier Trader, the bank that was losing business to the Great Far Western under the management of Spring and Ashby.

The hell-to-pay outside seemed to have sobered Morgan. He was still the glowing, palm-shuffling host, but he kept bobbing in and out of the room, always going toward the rear of the Land of Joy. Once he returned with beads of rain on his big shoulders but no one noticed it. His last slip-away to the stables told him everything he wanted to know.

"Ashby's going with 'em." The report came from a tall, rain-spilling fellow who had just slipped back into the stables. "He'd jump straight from the rim of hell and into the fire if he saw a dollar falling away from him. His horse is at the side of the bank waiting for him. Scanlin's men are behind the Kentucky Belle. Some's been slipping in and out the window, and he's been giving 'em money from a big pile of gold spread on his table."

"And—and—" There was eager tenseness in Morgan's tone. "Spring? What's he going to do?"

"Hell, stay behind!" The old man grinned. "Spring can't do nothing else. Can't ride nothing in the way of a horse except that big old dapple-gray beer wagon horse he owns, and then only in his quilted rocking chair he calls a saddle. If the horse breaks into a trot he has to grab the saddle-horn. He'll stick behind upstairs in the bank, until after the others are long-gone."

"Yes—yes, of course!" The darkness hid a wild gleam that suddenly filled Morgan's eyes. "And speaking of saddles, you'd better saddle and gun-up another horse—for a lady."

"For a lady?" A burly black-beard looked at him with a little start in the darkness. "You mean a woman's going out in this damn storm and we're to rig up a side-saddle?"

"No, not a side-saddle!" snapped Morgan. "She's a Texan, and like a Texan she'll ride. She'll fork her long and beautiful white legs across a saddle and ride like hell in the wind. Give her Bess the Babe's tall black gelding. He's too much for Bess but the Texan woman will ride his ears down."

He wheeled, and was gone again. All other instructions had been given, and he would not be back in the stables again tonight. By dawn, if things were to go as he had so carefully planned them, all Hell Creek Crossing would be set back on its heels, the best people in town due to do a little silent rejoicing. And it would not all be because of cattle being taken out of pens against a Federal court order.

Waiters were still pouring drinks at the banquet table. Rooter MacTavish was slumped and asleep at last in his chair. Somebody had crowned him with a salad bowl, and had not bothered to empty the remainder of a particularly oily combination, letting it slide and hang down his face and around his collar. Another enterprising prankster had thrust a tall bunch of celery in his hands, and there he sat with it in his lap, snoring and smacking sounds coming from him.

SLIPPING away upstairs, there was no surprise in Bank Morgan's face when he walked in to see Daisy Devine standing at the end of table with Bender and his men, Bender now in buckskins and ready for the saddle. Morgan only grinned at them.

"Why, yes"—he bowed, back to himself almost entirely now—"I knew she

came in. Fact is, I make it a point to know everything that goes on in my dump. I remember, too, what one of your men said downstairs, Bender, when—well, when I was still allowing them to drink. Your name and Bender's came up, Miss Devine, and he said if you two ever got together alone for thirty minutes there'd be no more Bender-Devine feud.

"But no matter, no matter!" He waved his big hands. "Everything is ready. You'll go out the back way and down the back stairs. And, yes, Miss Devine, a cracker-jack horse is waiting for you. He can't fly but"—he smiled—"he's one of the kind that can catch birds. Watch him. He'll turn with you on a dime."

There was not much more. Before they could leave the room they heard horsemen splashing furiously along the street. A quick but guarded look out the window just as distant lightning flashed showed Raul Scanlin and Lars Ashby in the lead. Behind them galloped a long line of riders with rifle barrels glistening.

"Two of my men are going with you, Bender." Morgan grabbed Dave's arm for the last time. "Good men who'll know where to lead you. One's Zip Clark, the other Pete Battle. Know that you can trust them or I'd never let them in on any secrets of mine."

"Thanks for everything, Bank!" Morgan's hand was caught in a last firm grip. "I make damned few friends."

Bank Morgan watched them go, stringing out, a fighting crew if he ever saw one in all his years on the frontier. The woman was beside Bender, tall, straight and damned striking even with a rain cape on her arm. What a neat package she would be if only she belonged to the Land of Joy!

"Worth a thousand dollars in gold in any rich man's arms for the evening!" he half-growled. "But"—he shrugged and grinned—"I'd hate to proposition her with that damned Bender around."

He was blinking and staggering when he blew out the light, locked the door, and went back downstairs. At the table he had a couple more drinks, saluting the salad-crowned bag of drunkenness at the head of the table. Little Jennie O'-Riley came to him and took his arm. Everybody in Hell Creek Crossing knew he was her man, and she missed few opportunities to show that she belonged to him.

"Tome on with Mommie, Poppie," she ordered in suddenly affected baby voice. "Mommie's 'itl' angel is goin' to bed and take her in his great big warm arms."

"Yeah, and naked!" He grinned drunkenly. "She's mine! All mine! I took her out of a settler train going through. Preacher's daughter! Tender chicken, sweet as peaches and cream. Everybody knows the story. Hell, yes!" He laughed thickly, still pawing and loving her. "They know something else, too. Jennie can drink a little and joke a little, but let any damned man start pawing my smooth and pretty meat, and I'll cut his heart out and throw it in his face! Won't I, Jenny?"

"And let any damned woman"—her voice was hard, eyes on Bess the Babe—"start belly dancing up to him, and I'll kill her!" She stamped a high heel on the floor and snapped her fingers. "Come on, my man!" She gave him a pull. "Mamma wants her daddy!"

Morgan rocked back and laughed wildly. "She's sizzlin', she's a sizzler!"

XII

ON AND away they reeled, the girl looking as if she had all she could do to keep Morgan on his feet. Laughter roared behind them, the young teller from the bank suddenly pulling Bess the Babe over on his lap and kissing her.

But all make-believe of drunkenness vanished the moment Bank Morgan and Jenny were upstairs in the lavishly furnished rooms on the third floor, with huge windows overlooking Glory Road. Before a cat could lick its whiskers Little Jennie O'Riley was twisting and

flinging herself out of her thin frills.

Door locked, Morgan walked to the table and poured drinks, his hands as steady as iron. Jenny was almost naked when she came to him, a thin scarf around her voluptuous bosom, gauzy black trunks not half enough to hide her shining beauty. She grabbed up her drink and quickly downed it.

"I need it, honey." She smiled. "A real bracer now."

"Jenny, you can't!" He caught her in his arms, kissing her, stroking her. "Stay here—and wait."

"Like hell!" She was twisting against him. "Where you go I go. Like that Texas filly you said would come here. A woman's man is her man. A real woman doesn't give a damn as long as she gets him and knows he's all hers. Like you—and me! What we said downstairs was true." She gave him a push and buckjumped away from him. "Honey"—her eyes were flashes, her teeth sparkling jewels in the lamplight —"isn't the storm wonderful? Surely that trainload of cattle and all the dirty work with it was sent here just to help us! I'll always love that Dave Bender and the Texas filly for coming our way."

"Love her, yeah." He nodded. "But be damned sure to keep your beautiful eyes off him. He's a handsome fellow. I want to keep him as my friend. Now, damn you, come back here and kiss me like you did just a minute ago, you sizzling little wench!"

"You'd stop in the middle of a gunfight"—she leaped back to his arms—"just to paw me, wouldn't you, darling?"

* * * * *

Windows closed, blinds and shades carefully drawn, Ira Spring paced the floor, nervous tonight. Few storms raged like the one raging outside. He could not leave the bank and head for his new fine house on the bench north of the town—not until some of the wind and rain let up. Here he was in the strongest and safest place in town, and yet he was as nervous as a cat, sometimes flinching at a quick shifting of his own shadow in the lamplight.

Lars Ashby kept half the life scared out of Ira Spring. Lars never knew when to let up on a deal. He never knew when to quit putting pressure to an iron heel when he had it on some man's neck, the strong was arrogant and merciless when opportunity came, yet a cringing, chattering damned coward at heart.

Here in Hell Creek Crossing Lars had found everything to his liking, stupid damned fools who would make deals involving as much as a full hundred thousand dollars merely on a nod and handshake. Legal papers meant nothing when fools were told that they were simple records. Most men signed them without knowing what they were signing, and it was there that Lars Ashby nailed them to the barrel-head.

It had taken a big, stupid Texas bum and cheap crook who knew no legal loops of law at all to put Lars Ashby down tonight. It would not be for long. The money Raul Scanlin had taken would be all he would get, and not most of it, at that, if he had been fool enough to go riding away in the darkness with what was left of it in his saddle-bags. Out there in the darkness somewhere, once the herd was stopped, Raul Scanlin would die in the fighting sure to take place. Lars would return with the herd or most of it, and there would be no more talk of pay.

ONE of these days something might happen to Lars Ashby. He knew just enough law to be a fool. A man did not have to know too much about it out here on the frontier. Most of the judges of the make-shift courts were about on par with old Rooter MacTavish, poorly paid, their few fees low—burned-out soaks who sat and sucked at the free troughs.

Rooter MacTavish could not write out a simple bill of sale without copying it

from a book so old it must have been published back in the times of Blackstone, Hale, Coke and Hawkins. The fast-talking lawyer floored them, swamped judges like him with words, and scared them out of the few wits they were supposed to have. Before another two years Hell Creek Crossing would just about belong to the firm of Spring and Ashby. Everything but the railroad, and they were not yet ready to start thinking about railroads.

It was funny. Ira Spring startled himself with the sound of his own sudden laugh. He was drinking too much, constantly going to the bottle and the glass on a table near the fat barrel in the corner that was the water cooler. Without keeping track of his drinks, he knew he had had many since Lars Ashby slipped out the side door into the rain.

All Hell Creek Crossing seemed to have grown quiet except for the storm. A peep out the window showed Glory Road awash from one end to the other in the pale lights along the street. Not a rig or a horse stood at the dripping hitch-racks. Just the storm out there, raging, swishing, great sheets of water, and only now and then a far, far flicker of lightning.

Finishing another drink, Ira Spring went back to the window in a little while. If anything it was worse out there. In a distant flash of lightning it looked as if Glory Road had turned to a muddy river banked on one side by the sidewalk and by the lift of the railroad tracks on the other. He swore as he turned away from the window, suddenly realizing that it was cold in the bank.

Getting almost to his desk he stopped with a grunt, hands jerking upward, eyes popping. A dripping figure in a slicker and slouched black hat stood in front of him at the head of the narrow stairs that came up from the basement. In the hands of the invader was a double-barreled shotgun, a sawed-off that was only a black club not much more than thirty inches long from butt to muzzle.

"Good evening, Mr. Spring," intoned a voice above the gun. "Quite a little storm we're having, isn't it?"

"Morgan!" The word seemed to buck from Spring's startled face. "I don't —understand!"

"Don't keep him waiting." That was another voice, the speaker hidden behind Morgan's big, dripping figure. "Get it done!"

"I told you"—Morgan's lips warped —"to stay outside."

"Too wet out there, and no one's moving around in that storm."

"What—what's the meaning of this?" Ira Spring was finding his voice again. "How'd you get in here?"

"With a key to the basement door." Morgan seemed to be smiling under that flopping black hat. "When you were erecting this bank I owned an interest in the hardware store here in town where you and Ashby bought your locks. Some little fancy of mine made me keep a set of keys for myself. We've come to have you open the vault, Spring."

The dripping figure behind Morgan was thrusting forward just to his left. Even in a hood and a rain cape and high boots Ira Spring could not help recognizing her as Little Jennie O'Riley, the preacher's daughter Morgan had tolled away from her father's wagon train bound for Montana.

"Soon that storm may be stopping," she said. "Shake a leg, Spring!" A gleaming little six-shooter covered him, firmly gripped in her hand. "We'll talk after everything is done."

"All we want is some legal tender." Morgan's smile was bitter. "I believe that's what you and your horse thief partner called it at the time I signed your damned papers."

"You haven't—haven't come for the mortgage we took on the Land of Joy a year ago!" sputtered the banker-lawyer.

MORGAN was moving toward him. Spring stared, seeing that both

hammers of the shotgun were cocked, with fingers curled on the triggers. "As she said, we don't have all night. Move!"

"This is robbery!" Spring was moving, hands still up, eyes still popping, face bloodless. "The law—"

"Damn the law!" snarled Morgan. "The less you say about a filthy gang of cutthroats who'd have a thing like you in it, the better!" He was coming on, snarling. "I'm a pioneer on this big frontier. I'm one of the fighting men who made it safe enough for scum like you and Ashby to come West. The bulk and file of us respected the little struggling courts of justice we had set up to protect the weak from the strong. Then pencil-sharpening rats like you! You with damned legal terms and the belief you are the untouchables! You—"

"Never mind that, honey!" The little trick beside him nudged him with her elbow. "We didn't come here to give him a lecture. Hell, we came to rob his bank of the certain things you want. Get it done!"

Ira Spring was sobbing and cursing a few minutes later. But the door of the vault was open. The girl stood behind him, pressing the muzzle of the shotgun hard against his spine. Inside the vault, with a big lamp burning brightly, Bank Morgan was opening files and spilling great piles of papers on the floor and making certain that they lay in a loose heap. He was paying no attention to a large safe inside the vault that would hold only money. Certain papers he wanted for himself were in his pocket and going to stay there and be burned when he got back in the Land of Joy.

"You're going to try to ruin us!" Ira Spring was whimpering again. "All those papers are legal—"

"Legal tender!" Bank Morgan grinned at him as he struck a match, and dropped to one knee to touch the flame to the great pile on the vault floor. "In a little while there won't be any."

"You'll spend the rest of your life in a penitentiary for this, Morgan! I'll spend every dollar I own to—to—"

A great fear stopped him. Morgan walked behind him, taking the shotgun from the girl. His voice was short, biting when he spoke to her.

"Go downstairs, and wait."

"Naw—naw!" Spring's voice jerked. "You can't do this!"

"You've had your last bundle of legal tender signed, Spring." The voice behind him was like a death bell slowly tolling, the fire inside the vault leaping, crackling, turning into a roaring furnace. "With the print so fine a man would need a microscope to read the fine and flowering legal terms put there to cut his throat! I've paid you most of the money I was fool enough to borrow from you two wolves. I had to send your papers to a real lawyer in St. Louis to learn that I could never get out of your clutches. Until I burned these papers you and Ashby own the Land of Joy, and all the money I pay until I die will only be called rent."

"Lars did that!"

"You were right beside him!"

"And you're going to kill me tonight to—to hide this!"

"Odd, isn't it?" Bank Morgan cut his eyes toward the narrow stairway leading to the basement. A hooded head was just disappearing. "Odd, I mean"—there was a short laugh remindful of the way Lars Ashby sometimes laughed at men when he had them where he wanted them—"that you would just now get around to realizing that! Just couldn't let a louse like you send me to the penitentiary for life, Mr. Spring."

XIII

QUIVERING in the basement a little figure waited, nerve gone now, her entire body trembling as she hugged the jamb of the door. Above the shaft that was the stairway the light was getting bright and hot, the fire up there climbing into a steady roaring.

Outside the storm roared, tons of water pouring through the streets.

Thunder seemed to have timed itself. There had been none in a long interval of blowing and swishing. It came now, low and rumbling, appearing to grip both the ground and sky, shaking Hell Creek Crossing from end to end. In the midst of it two short, heavy reports sounded, a noise that was like the double bang of powerful sledge-hammers on the floor above the girl's head.

Bank Morgan walked quickly down the steps, empty shotgun in his hand. An arm reached out and pulled the trembling girl to him. In the light coming down the stairway he kissed her. His voice was hoarse when he spoke.

"This cinches it, Jennie. I've sworn I'd never marry any damned woman that ever walked. But tomorrow I'm going to marry you."

A few moments later they were stepping outside, locking the basement door behind them, the walls of rain wrapping and hiding them in the swishing and flying wet sheets.

"Legal tender!" he growled, looking back at brightening streaks beginning to glow around the bank windows. "Now, damn 'em, they're paid, and we again own the Land of Joy, *Mrs. Morgan. . . .*"

Right from the start it was like plunging out into a cold, roaring and rocking hell. Without Pete Battle and Zip Clark, the two tall, square-jawed Bank Morgan men as guides, Dave Bender and his riders might never have forded Hell Creek. In this black night it had become the raging flood of dangerous yellow water that had made men give it its name when the railroad was pushing its way across the Wyoming prairies.

In many places no living thing could have crossed it. Battle and Clark knew what Scanlin men ahead of them had had to know. They hugged the south side of the broken cattle pens with their torn-down gates and splintered gaps in the planking. Beyond them they swung close to the railroad for nearly a mile, then turned straight south. Here was flat rock underfoot, the creek spread out until it was eight hundred yards across, and the water was never higher than the bellies of the spooky and snorting horses moving under tight reins.

Across the muddy flood, knee to knee, rode two people who had spent the most of their lives trying to hate each other because they had been caught in the net of a Texas feud neither had had a hand in starting. Daisy Devine's hand was in Dave Bender's hand all the way across the muddy fording. Once across they were still side by side. By this time it was beginning to simmer through the hard head of even old Ute Brand that it should have been like this years and years ago.

Rattlesnake Sam Gore and his gang of hellions had pushed the cattle across the creek just in time to escape the steadily rising flood. It was still rising. Before dawn without some let-up in the storm it would just about cover the valley. But it was behind now, and the gang was streaking along at a cantering pace the horses could hold for hours.

Bender had not talked to Gore or a single one of his men. Bank Morgan had handled all that. Zip Clark and Pete Battle seemed to know just where they were going and how to get there. They were heading to the southeast now, skirting the foot of the great mesa and bearing toward what seemed like endless seas of dark hills and broken peaks that were showing in ever-widening intervals of flashes from distant lightning. Battle finally dropped back to ride to Bender's right.

"By some who know best," he explained, "this country ahead is described as hell turned inside out. Some big army man fighting Cheyennes in them hills some years ago called 'em Hell's Blow Holes. In places it took only a few Indians to turn him and seven whole troops of cavalry back and on the run. I don't yet know how a man can expect to get a herd of cattle out of them holes, but I reckon it was the quickest and best place Bank and Sam could think of."

BENDER could see that. Hills seemed to be squeezing in from eastward, gradually forming a great trough or runway that would hold a stampeding herd into a long mass and prevent the cattle from breaking away in widening lines and tatters that could scatter in all directions. The smart Raul Scanlin would see this, and there was little doubt that he and his men were somewhere straight ahead.

They crossed only one high ridgeback. By the time they reached it there seemed to be a quick letting up in the storm. Battle looked back at the way they had come, and suddenly pulled up.

"Look!" he exclaimed. "You can even see back to the Crossing now! And something's happening back there!"

The whole crowd stopped, everybody looking back. It was as if a heavy wet blanket had been lifted. A few blobs of light were showing along the lower side of Hell Creek Crossing, looking like pale pinpoints in the distance. Another light outshone everything. In air that was still for the moment that light was like a long red tongue standing pointed and shimmering toward the sky. Ute Brand spoke.

"Somebody's house a-burning, I'll swear!"

"More'n just a house, I'd say." Pete Battle was intently studying the sight. "Danged if I don't believe it's Kentucky Belle!"

"Nope, it ain't that." Zip Clark was staring. "Pete, I'm hanged if I don't believe it's Spring and Ashby's new bank! Whatever it is, it's sure burning hotter'n the hubs of tarnation."

It was gone a few moments later, blotted out behind another spasmodic wall of driving rain coming down. Still speculating and wondering, the men rode on, the ridgeback soon hiding everything behind them to northward. An hour later a real break of the storm seemed to be coming after another roaring downpour.

The moon broke through the clouds an hour before dawn, hills looming at every hand, big, dark and ghostly, some in the queer shapes of towering stone gods looking down on them. By this time the riders were scattering right and left by ones and twos. Sudden gunfire from the shadows and black pockets ahead were liable to come bursting out on them and catching them in a body.

Already they were picking up trail, cattle trailed by horses having passed this way. By dawnlight the trail was as plain as the ears on the heads of their horses. Soon it looked as if dozens of trails were coming together from the right and left, and Pete Battle was quick to explain it.

"Cattle scattered back there in the little gangs of knolls we come through. Here the buffalo hunter crowd got 'em bunched into a point agin. If we bothered to look around much we'd find where Rattlesnake Sam and his men turned back. All he agreed to do was to pour the herd in the gateway of Hell's Blow Holes."

"And this is it?"

"This is it, yeah." Battle nodded. "Bad as I hate to say it, this is where me and Zip turns back, too, Mr. Bender. We hoped to get here before this much light from the sky."

"It's like this, you see." Clark swung his horse closer. "Me and Pete have wives and children back in the Crossing. We each have a good house. Trouble is, Spring and Ashby hold mortgages on 'em—"

"And," cut in Bender with a smile, "you don't yet know who's going to win this fight! Turn back, fellows, and no hard feelings. Morgan will give each one of you one hundred dollars in gold when you get back to town. I told him I wanted it like that before I left. Thanks for bringing us this far. We think we know who's going to win this fight."

For the first time since he had left Hell Creek Crossing, Dave Bender was riding on alone a few minutes later. In spite of Daisy Devine's protests, she had been forced to ride back near the

tail end of the procession. Now as if entering hell itself, Dave was going down and down on a wide slope that twisted and turned drunkenly ahead, the queer, god-shaped formations of rock rising higher and higher at either hand.

THREE miles of slopes lifted behind them, twisting like a dark serpent's tail. The trail was still down and down as if they were riding for the very bowels of the earth and hell itself. Almost suddenly Bender had come to a tall bench. Six hundred yards further on was the beginning of a round, bowl-shaped valley.

"Hell's Gates," intoned the voice of Ute Brand in the background, "here we are! And yonder, Dave, is them damn cows as sure as shooting!"

A scream in the air answered him, another and another, bullets slapping and crying on the slopes behind them. Like startled birds men were flinging themselves from their saddles. With bullets much faster than sound, half of them were on the ground before the reports of the gunfire came raging up to them. Now it was blast on blast, one volley after another. Two horses bawled, reared, and fell dead. Another, staggering and bawling, turned back up the slope.

"Damn 'em!" howled Brand. "We can't even see a man shooting at us!"

XIV

AND don't laugh! I said he'd follow, I said he was back there!" Raul Scanlin was going wild in a brush-fringed ravine a full half-mile away. "Damn him! damn him! And there she is with him! The doublecrossing hussy! I knew she'd swing to him if she ever got a chance! Damn her! Damn her to hell! Kill that girl on the slope! Kill her!"

The Scanlin forces had the advantage, and with men Lars Ashly had managed to get at the last moment, the group on the slope were outnumbered more than three to one. Every horse had been hidden in a deeper ravine, the rim screened with low pines. Now there was nothing to do but clean them down to the last man there on the slope.

"You opened fire too soon!" Lars Ashby could see the mistake. "I told you, you big fool, to wait until they were at the foot of the bench! They wouldn't have had a chance!"

"Kill 'em—kill 'em!" Scanlin raged on, not even hearing him. "Get that girl! Shoot her down! She'll kill you and never bat an eye!"

Two men were down up there now, dropped in limp heaps. Two others were hit, staggering, bobbing shapes trying to take cover behind rocks, each with a rifle. Dave Bender was doing the expected. He was coming on, a rifle in one hand and a belt of cartridges in the other. Behind him his horse had spun around, bawled, and fallen on his right side. Beyond that horse three others were now down, another hit and turning.

A leaping, zigzagging figure on the slope, Bender fell, going down behind a clump of rocks and brush. The girl came as if out of nowhere, zigzagging and leaping as Bender hod leaped, puffs of dust flying around her where bullets were striking. She went down behind the rocks where Bender had dropped.

"Watch him!" yelled Scanlin. "He's only gone into hiding! She's right there with him! Keep bullets pouring on those rocks!"

"The others are getting shelter, Scanlin!" wailed a warning voice somewhere off to his right. "Shoot faster, boys, *faster!*"

"Damn you, Scanlin," Ashby was still yelling, "I told you to wait! Fool, don't you know anything about taking orders!"

"Who are you to give *me* orders!" Scanlin's laugh was a crazy man's burst of sound. "I'm as good as you are! Get in the fight! We've got to kill everything on that slope or they'll kill us!"

The slope was already a pale puff of

smoke and a gashing tongue of flame here and there. A man lying against the side of the ravine two yards to Scanlin's right was suddenly staggering back, a rifle slipping from his hands. He turned, rocked, and pitched forward on his face, streaks of red beginning to pour through a round hole in the crown of his hat. He was no more than on the ground before another long, loose figure was sliding down beyond him.

"I told you to wait!" Ashby was whimpering now, the one thought in his mind. "You would have had all of them right there in plain sight of the killing!"

"Bender's shiftin'!" The voice up the ravine was laden with terror. "He's still alive!"

"Who'n hell," snarled another voice, "said he was dead!"

"If you had only waited!" moaned Ashby. "You damned fool! You crazy damned fool, Scanlin! You're scared to death!"

Again Scanlin ignored him, eyes on the slope. Bender had moved again, a flash, a man in the open, a bob and he was out of sight, men shooting at him and puffs of dust flying.

"There! Get her!"

Daisy was following Bender like something flying and bobbing through the air. Dust flew to her right and left, and she was gone, down and out of sight, the rise above them ringing as others up there sped up the pace of their shooting.

"Damn it!" Another man, this time to Scanlin's left, was buckling backward, rifle dropping, both hands going to his blood-spouting face. "I—I'm hit!"

"Fight, you fools!" yelled Scanlin, shaking his fist. "Damn you, fight! Kill that mob up there!"

"Why don't you try some fighting for a change!" snarled back a wild voice. "Get that damn Ashby in it, too!"

LARS ASHBY had not fired a single shot, and he never fired one. He had a rifle. It still hung to the side of his saddle in the ravine fifty yards behind him. Hatless, he was moving from place to place, cautiously lifting his head here and there to peer through the weeds and brush, or from behind a rock.

The slope and the rim of the bench fascinated Lars Ashby. He could not see how that one girl and those men up there could still be alive to fight. It seemed that hundreds of bullets were raining on them, enough to kill forty men and half as many women, and yet they were still up there, thin bursts of smoke and bright blades of fire jerking, bullets whistling, crying and wailing as they raked the ravine, the rocks and brush along the rim.

"Another one's shifting!" howled a voice up the ravine. "Get him! Get him! Kill him!"

Lars Ashby was like a man hypnotized. His head poked higher, eyes big and round, mouth open with awe. A man was moving up there, ducking and darting, dust jerking little jets around him. In one last furious leap the man was gone, dropping behind a big rock with a few low pines in front of it. Instantly, it seemed, that man was back in the fight, a blade of fire and a burst of smoke jerking from the side of the rock, a bullet coming down into the ravine.

And then Lars Ashby saw something else. He was easing his head back and down when a curling little streak of dust lifted in front of him. It was there for only a flash, no wider than a penknife's blade. A noise that was like a cork popping from a bottle finished it and everything else, instantly blotting out the sounds of the firing, the bright morning light, the sky and earth.

Without as much as a grunt Lars Ashby tumbled backward and slid down the slope of the ravine on his head and shoulders. He came to a halt like that, on the back of his head and neck, the tightened seat of his trousers turned to the sky.

"Naw!" The sound that came from the staring Raul Scanlin was like the

short bark of a mildly startled puppy. His ears had heard the sickening *plop!* of the bullet going through a man's head. His eyes were seeing the man, a ridiculous figure in the bottom of the ravine, his big seat stretched to the sky, and yet Raul Scanlin could not believe it. Ashby had died without lifting a hand in the fight!

"They've quit shooting on the slope!" The voice up the ravine startled Scanlin back to himself. "Something's up! Watch 'em!"

"Keep fighting!" Scanlin cursed himself for that. His voice was high and cracked, sounding like the voice of some old woman screaming in terror. "Don't quit shooting!"

"Shooting at what!" a voice wailed back. "There ain't nothing now to shoot at up there!"

Scanlin started to take a look. Remembering what had happened to Lars Ashby he fell back, pawing at his face and his trembling chin, a notion filling him to leap to his feet and start running. A glance at the sky-tailed figure of Ashby made him crowd back, a whimper coming from him, hand again pawing at his trembling chin.

It was not right! Nothing was right now! Hell, the fight had come to an absolute stop! A quick, smashing, frightfully painful hush had come, no shots to the right, no shots to the left, not a sound now coming from the slope. Nothing! Had everybody suddenly ceased to breathe? Had everybody dropped like Lars, poking his tail to the sky, legs and feet flopped over his head and face, toes touching the ground, a thin stream of red coming from between his eyes?

"It—it's all wrong." The hand pawed back to the trembling chin. Somebody's teeth chattered, rattling like dice in a gambler's hand. Scanlin swore whisperingly, realizing that the chattering teeth were his own. "It can't be!"

WAIT and wait—and wait! It seemed an eternity, not a sound on the slope, not a thing to shoot at up there, not a man even breathing here in the ravine. Then there was a startled gasp around a little shoulder in the wall of the ravine to his right. He heard an oath, a sudden scurry of spurred heels, then another sound like that. Again a voice rasped, choked on an oath, and a shot that was like the *boom!* of a hammer on a drum came down the ravine. Suddenly hell was to pay at close range, men snarling, cursing, scurrying feet turning to run, shot after shot blasting.

All of it was happening to Raul Scanlin's right. Not a sound was coming from his left. Like a startled bull breaking cover, he lunged to his feet. Body in a low crouch he began to run. Dave Bender's face seemed to poke out from behind a shoulder in the ravine seventy feet away. Scanlin wheeled, and fell, a shot roaring, a bullet smashing against his shoulder blade as he rolled back around the abrupt bulge.

He was deserted! The men to his left had sneaked away, back through the brush and rock, and were heading to the waiting horses. He heard distant snorts, the sudden hammerlike pound of hoofs, saddles squeaking, brush popping.

Run! Run like hell! That was the only thing to do now! What did his men care? He had paid them all off last night. They had pocketfuls of money now, good-spending gold, and girls and women were south of the tracks in Hell Creek Crossing waiting to give them something better than gunfire and bullets.

He was blowing when he whipped around the bulge, going in the opposite direction from where he had seen Bender's face and got that smashing pain in the shoulder-blade. The way looked clear. All he had to do was to get sixty steps more and he would be at a break in the wall of the ravine. Into it and he would be heading straight for the horses. He had almost reached it when a cold, jarring voice skidded and stumbled him to a halt, his big hat flying off, stark terror rooting him to the ground.

"They run as usual, Scanlin." Ute Brand was looking at him, old face twisted into something like a smile over the long and gleaming barrels of a pair of six-shooters. "We knowed they would. Worked a joker on you and come in on you from each end of your damned ditch. Dave Bender's going to marry your dead sister's gal. Ain't right for him to shoot some more of her kinfolks just before they get hitched. I ain't kin, and ain't aimin' to be. Drag your gun or take it naked!"

"No, damn you!"

XV

WITH UTE BRAND looking him in the eye, Raul Scanlin certainly never intended to pull the six-shooter at his right hip. Only when leaving the Kentucky Belle had he buckled on those heavy belts and big weapons, and now he faced a man who had long wanted to kill him and would never let him get away this time. He was whipped, deserted, at the end of the long and bloody trail. Had he had time he could have blamed Lars Ashby for ganging up all the men in this big ravine. Bender and his little bunch had simply fanned out up there on the slope of the bench, crawling and worming their way down through shallow dry washes to get at him from either side.

And now he made his last great mistake. It must have been the result of a nervous flinching. Terror alone must have made his big hand jerk toward the butt of the six-shooter. Almost to it the hand actually stopped. It started a jerk upward. Caught before in gun jams like this he had suddenly lifted his hands, refusing to fight, begging himself out of being killed. He opened his mouth now, but it was too late.

One of Ute Brand's six-shooters bounced, a bursting ring of smoke and a licking blade of hot flame gushing from the muzzle. A warm streak whipped through Raul Scanlin's belly, a bullet that left no pain because no bones were in the way. Screaming like a maddened wild animal, he made a lunge forward as if about to attack the old man with his bare hands. Brand merely took a step backward, and thundered another hole through him, old face smiling.

Raul Scanlin was too much of a coward to think of fighting even now. It was that break in the wall of the ravine he was lunging for. He kept going, impelled by one thought—to get away. By the time he had made the break two more bullets had gone through him.

Terror held him up, kept him on his feet, old Ute Brand again calmly stepping back, the cold and merciless killer now finishing a simple job.

As Scanlin lunged into the break, Ute stepped forward, paused, nodded, and fired twice more. Raul Scanlin spun completely around and fell forward on his face, high weeds and brush in the break appearing to swallow him.

"And that," intoned the old man, beginning to reload his weapons, "will sort of keep his carcass hid when the gal comes up. Funny that he'd gang up all his men in a hole like this. —Hi, Dave!" Bender had just appeared around the shoulder ahead. "Sort of looks like the war's over. Them what can are running. Eight behind me, nine counting another feller." —he glanced toward the break where the weeds and bushes were hiding Scanlin—"have quit the fighting business."

"There are five in the other direction, Ute, and one's Lars Ashby. Looks like he won't be trying to buy any more stolen cattle."

"Dave!" Daisy Devine had come around the shoulder, pale-faced, her sea-green eyes shining. "The others are running away!"

"They sure are!" Brand was coming on toward her, to keep her from seeing inside the break in the wall. "Seems as how your uncle was one of the first to lead the way."

"And he would!" she cried. "You

know him! He always gets others killed, and then turns tail and runs!"

"But it's over, Daisy!" Something in old Ute Brand's face had made Bender quickly turn and catch her in his arms. "The cattle will now go back to Hell Creek Crossing, and—"

"Why, sure, why, sure!" Brand was behind him, giving him a push. "Let's get on back the way you come. The air's kind of smoky here. . . ."

BY NOON, the big herd was again slowly on the move, plodding up the winding trail and out through Hell's Gate. Three Bender men were making their last ride. The bodies of Mystery Smith, Luke Rider and Horse Jefferson were roped across the saddles of horses that had belonged to Scanlin's men. Not until they were back on the higher ground had Dave Bender told the girl beside him that her uncle was back there, and she had nodded, face cold and sober.

"I knew, David." She was gentle about it. "Ute Brand didn't fool me. If it had only happened years ago so many Devines and Benders could have lived. Let—let's look for peace now, and no more blood and tears!"

But she was still afraid of one man, and he knew it. That man would be Ira Spring, the banker. Shortly after one o'clock they were hearing about him. A light wagon had appeared ahead, drawn by four big mules. On the front seat rode two old men.

"Bank Morgan figured you'd need some grub and such," one of them explained. "I'm Hank Watson, and my pard's Seth Meadows. In the shape of eats and such I reckon we've got just about everything."

"And Bank, himself, will maybe be along soon." Meadows nodded. "We had a big fire in town last night. The new bank was gutted from basement to the wide-open sky. All that downpouring rain kept other things from burning, but for a time folks was scared."

"Push McCoy's a good detective, they say now." Watson was scratching his head and looking upward with a wry face. "Seems how Ira Spring was in the bank and maybe got drunk. Push found he'd had the vault open for some fool reason. Must of dropped a lamp. Some bit but not much of Spring was found in the door of the burned-out vault. Queer now, ain't it, how some of these hog-rich will hit the bottle when some little something goes agin 'em? Only thing left in the bank was the money in an extra safe, and them who own bank books will get that back, according to Bank Morgan."

The returning riders said nothing. With the herd drifted to a stop they had food, and again pushed on. An hour later they saw two fast black horses rounding a bend ahead, behind them trailing a shining black coach. At either side of it galloped four men. Two of them were Zip Clark and Pete Battle.

"Yeah, Bank sent us!" grinned Battle. "Wants you two in town as soon as wheels will turn you there. Something big is up."

"One thing," explained Clark, "is two big cow buyers from Kansas City who got off the morning westbound. Straight and square, I heard Bank say, and they'll buy your herd the minute you can get it in town."

"But it ain't just that!" Battle was excited and unable to hide it. "From the way Bank acts it's a matter of life or death. The rest of us fellers are here to help with the cattle. Burn the wind and go!"

It was almost a wild ride. The man on the driver's seat was constantly cracking his whip, slowing the horses here, then letting them almost fly over the level stretches. Once in sight of the Land of Joy it looked to be decorated for some wild frontier celebration, flags and bunting flying, and all the bands in town playing on the sidewalk. Dressed like a killer-diller on his way to a Presidential ball, Bank Morgan met them at the front door, hurrying them straight up to Bender's room.

"I sent to your hotel for your things, Miss Devine!" he explained. "There's also been some store-buying for you. I want you and Dave to dress the best you were ever dressed in your lives. This is my day to celebrate, and the sky's the limit."

"But—but," stammered Bender, "how'd you know we'd get back? We might have all been killed!"

"Not with Rattlesnake Sam Gore and his gang hugging the high places, Dave." Morgan winked. "He didn't leave you. Had you ever needed him in a bad way he would have come in. Get ready. A barber'll be ready to shave you in a minute. —Miss Devine, please."

He held out his arm to her. With Bender staring he led her away. Beyond the door he spoke to her in a low voice.

"Before I forget it, Manly at the Kentucky Belle told me this morning that your uncle left quite a bag of gold in his safe just before he left with Ashby last night. Just thought you'd want to know it's there waiting for you."

FORTY-FIVE minutes later Bank Morgan was turning all Hell Creek Crossing into storming hilarity from one end to the other. Down the stairs he came, as proudly as any king. On his arm, in rustling white and gleaming jewels from her fingers to her hair, was the girl all of them knew as Little Jennie O'Riley.

Dave Bender was the awkward one. He was in a swallow-tailed coat, a thing he had never worn the likes of before. Beside him in sparkling white and gleaming from what seemed head to heel in gems was the girl they had known as Daisy Devine.

Trailing the four, looking stern in his dead-black, was Reverend Andrew Larsen, the preacher. At his side was his rather stout wife. Behind them followed another dozen men and women.

"Quiet!" Bank Morgan lifted his hand when they reached the foot of the stairs, his voice filling the Land of Joy and half the street. "Quiet! This day and date I have something important to say! Meet the wife—*and don't laugh!*"

There was no chance to introduce the just-married couple behind him, and there was no chance for anything else. The Land of Joy appeared to suddenly swell, to pop and groan, every rafter and timber and plank beginning to tremble and shake. The noise of the cheering, the pounding of feet and clapping hands seemed to roar on out to the street, up and down it, across the tracks and to the dives over there. In an opened upstairs window overlooking the street a big red-headed man who must have had leather bellows for lungs was trying to tell the rest of it through a long megaphone:

"Ladies and gentlemen! Ladies and gentlemen! From this hour on to midnight tomorrow night all the drinks, all the loving and fun in this town is on Bank Morgan! Grab your pardners—*and give it hell!*"

Roar on roar of yells filled and refilled the town.

Next Issue's Three Exciting Novels!

NO GRASS IS FREE by FRANK P. CASTLE

THE TREATY MAKER by CLARK GRAY

PALISANDRO by JAMES W. ROUTH

EARTHQUAKE A LA DINGLE

By BEN FRANK

NO QUESTION about it, Dingle Williams was the most one-track minded cow-hand who ever set a number eleven boot on Box H soil. Old man Holister almost didn't hire him that day he rode up to the ranch-house and asked for a job, for Peggy, the old man's daughter, just happened to appear at a window. Seeing her, Dingle put a match into his big mouth and tried to strike a cigarette on the seat of his pants. The old man knew right then

He Was a One-Track Cowhand—and Sometimes Got Off the Track!

that Dingle was first cousin to a bad risk, but he was short-handed.

As long as he put his mind to it, Dingle was a better than average hand. But now and then, he got to thinking about something unrelated to the job he was doing, and the next thing you knew, he'd pulled a boner.

Dingle worked a year for the old man and the long-legged ranny would have been content to stay on forever at forty dollars a month and the chance to admire Miss Peggy from afar, never once dreaming that her mothering instinct made her favor him above all young men of her acquaintance. But on the day the big-eared red-head turned twenty-three, the old man fired him.

Holister's face was the color of raw beef-steak. "I send you out with a hammer and an oil-can," he roared, "and you climb the windmill and bust a couple of gear wheels, instead of hammerin' the kinks out of that brace on the gate. And then what do you do? You oil the brace. Git, you no-good, half-witted loon!"

Dingle saddled his knobby-kneed hammerhead and prepared to "git." It never occurred to him to explain that he'd pulled this boner because he'd got to thinking about his old saddle-mate, Eddie Poole. Eddie had been bushwhacked a few days before.

When Dingle reached the front gate, Peggy was there ahead of him. The sun tangled in her golden hair right dazzlingly, and she was as pretty as anyone you ever saw. Looking at her, Dingle forgot he'd been fired. He even forgot he was forking a horse and almost fell out of the saddle.

"Dingle," she said, "I'm going to miss you."

Dingle was so dumbfounded he couldn't speak. There were real tears glistening in Peggy's blue eyes. He slid off his horse and pawed a large red bandana from a pocket to sop up the tears. But at that moment, old man Holister appeared.

He didn't like the looks of things, and said so, pointedly.

SUDDENLY Peggy's eyes blazed, and she squared her slim shoulders. She agreed that up to date, Dingle hadn't set the world on fire. "But," she added fiercely, "he's going to turn over a new leaf. And when he gets his first thousand dollars, he's coming back for me. Aren't you, Dingle?"

This was news to Dingle, but it sounded exactly like what he wanted to do. "Yes'm," he said firmly.

"It's a deal," the old man said happily, for he figured he'd be shed of Dingle Williams forever under those terms. "When you get a thousand saved up, you'll be welcome back."

Head in the clouds, Dingle mounted again and rode away. He was in sight of River Bend before he came back to earth and began to think somewhat rationally.

During seven years of cowpunching, he'd managed to save exactly one hundred dollars and seventeen cents. At that rate, as near as he could figure, it would take him sixty years to accumulate a thousand bucks. He suddenly felt downright discouraged, so he turned his single-track mind in another direction.

Come to think of it, he felt mighty provoked at whoever had shot Eddie Poole in the back. Eddie had been a little crazy, perhaps, to quit punching cows to take a job in a feed store, but still Dingle felt warmly toward him. And now that he wasn't tied down to a job, he guessed he'd better ride on to Hedgehog where Eddie had worked and look into things.

A little later, he rode into River Bend, the county seat. A knot of men standing in front of Sheriff Trump's office caught his attention, so he wandered over. He wanted to ask the sheriff about Eddie's death, anyway.

"It's like this," Trump was saying, "This tramp artist up and died in our town. Since he didn't have any money, I'm selling his belongings to pay the burial expenses. Who'll bid fifty dollars for the whole outfit?"

Then he looked at Dingle and smiled.

A youngish bachelor, Sheriff Trump had had an eye on Peggy Holister for some time. Aware of Peggy's protective feeling toward the hapless Dingle, he considered the lanky cowhand a fly in his soup and always before had treated him disdainfully. So his big friendly smile caught Dingle off balance. Before Dingle realized what he was doing, he had nodded pleasantly to Trump.

"Sold," Trump said, "to Dingle Williams for fifty dollars!"

Horrified, Dingle started to slink away, but the bystanders laughingly pushed him forward. The next thing he knew, he had become poorer by fifty dollars and was the sole owner of three badly done paintings of trees, mountains and sky-blue streams, a few rectangles of cardboard upon which the former owner had planned to paint other pictures, and a great assortment of paints and camel hair brushes.

"Dingle old pal," Sheriff Trump gloated, "you got enough paint in them tubes, I reckon, to cover a barn."

The transaction left Dingle so furious that he didn't remember his intention of inquiring about Eddie's death until he was halfway to Hedgehog.

Night found him camped on the edge of a mountain stream. He was munching crackers and cheese when a lop-eared hound showed up. Dingle took one look into the dog's wistful brown eyes and shared his lunch with the critter. The next morning when he rode into Hedgehog, the hound followed, wagging his bur-choked tail, except now and then when he stopped to scratch a flea loose from his yellow hide.

It was Dingle's first visit to the town. Looking about, he saw a half-dozen false-fronted business buildings, twice as many houses and a few saddle horses drooping at the sagging hitchrails. He slid to the ground and went into the feed store where Eddie had worked, wondering whether the owner would laugh him out of the place for getting stung in that auction.

IT TURNED out that Tom Fergus, the proprietor, was a right friendly old gent. He was also the town marshal.

"Ain't got no idea who shot Eddie," he said. "He stayed late one night to help me unload some feed. Somebody got him when he was on the way home."

Dingle scowled fiercely and ran a long-fingered hand over his old six-gun. He felt plumb blood-thirsty.

"Sheriff Trump ain't learned nothin', either," Fergus continued. "You see, there's been some trouble in this part of the county lately. Some hold-ups. Trump and me figure that somebody tried to rob Eddie, and he put up a fight. But that's guess work."

Dingle got to his feet. "I aim to do some investigatin' of my own," he said. "Any idea where I could stay a few days?"

Fergus pulled a key from his pocket and handed it over. "Eddie built himself a little shack about a half-mile west of town. No reason why you can't stay there if you want to."

Then curiosity got the better of the feed dealer. "You mind tellin' me what all that stuff is tied to your saddle?"

Dingle suddenly felt embarrassed. "Just some stuff I bought in River Bend," he mumbled, and hastily returned to his sagging horse and the patient, flea-bitten hound.

Eddie Poole's shack turned out to be a one-roomed tarpapered affair set in the shade of a half-dozen pine trees. Staring about, Dingle discovered a log cabin a piece farther up the hill. A fat woman stood in the doorway, staring back at him. A pole corral held two saddle horses and a cow. A few red hens and a rooster scratched about the bare yard.

An hour later, Dingle was settled in his new home and had unpacked his meager belongings, including the pictures and paints.

After a week in and around Hedgehog, he didn't know any more about the murder of Eddie Poole than before. Also, instead of getting closer to his goal of

a thousand dollars, he was gradually going broke.

At first, Dingle had merely been curious about this picture painting business and had dabbled a little here and there on a square of cardboard. But the brighter colors fascinated him. The next thing he knew, he was trying to paint a sunset. In fact, he became so engrossed in the business that he never realized that he was being watched suspiciously by two gauntfaced, hard-eyed gents and a fat old woman, known collectively as "them no-good Rattles."

One day, the Rattle brothers even went so far as to sneak up to the back of the tar-papered shack and watch Dingle paint.

Toot Rattle, the older, followed by Jute, ventured around the side of the shack. There they both could view Dingle's picture propped against an old stump. What he saw made Toot swallow half his cud of eating tobacco and Jute stare, goggle-eyed.

Ma Rattle was waiting for them at the log cabin, the beady eyes in her round, puffy face glittering.

"Well?" she said harshly.

"We don't have to worry none about this Dingle hombre," Toot said hoarsely. "He's plumb loco."

"What makes you think so?" Ma asked.

"I got a look at that pitcher he's paintin'," Toot answered, paling slightly at the memory. "You never saw nothin' like it. Only a crazy man would paint somethin' like that."

"He don't act very sharp, neither," Jute put in. "Saw him put a match in his mouth and try to strike a cigarette."

But Ma Rattle still looked worried.

That same day, Sheriff Trump rode into the shade of Dingle's pines and stared at the painting. After his initial shock had passed, he threw back his big handsome head and roared with laughter. That brought Dingle and the hound to the door.

"What is it?" Trump asked, wiping his eyes.

"It's a sunset," Dingle answered, "only I ain't finished—"

TRUMP had reached out and raked a finger across one corner of the painting, making quite a smear.

"Hey," Dingle yelled, "you'll ruin—"

Grinning happily, the sheriff rolled a spur wheel over the fresh paint, leaving what looked like a mouse's trail.

"Get out!" Dingle said wrathfully. "What business you got bein' here, anyway?"

"Plenty," Trump retorted. "There was a holdup last night, and I came to Hedgehog to look things over. Old man Fergus said you were up here, looking for Eddie Poole's murderer. Thought I'd stop by to ask you if you'd caught the killer." Laughing, he wheeled his horse and rode away.

Still indignant, Dingle stood in the doorway, following the sheriff's retreating figure with angry eyes. Vaguely, he noted Ma Rattle's red rooster venturing across the trail, and the hound baring his fangs and advancing toward the intruder. But thinking nothing of it, Dingle went back into the shack and began to make supper.

The next morning he rode into Hedgehog.

Tom Fergus was completely baffled about the holdup. "Whoever's doin' this robbin' is mightly slick," he said. "He don't let anybody see him and he don't leave any tracks."

Later, Dingle mounted and rode slowly homeward. Observing the three Rattles sitting in the shade of their rickety front porch, he lifted a hand in friendly greeting. The Rattles did not respond.

"Kind of stand-offish neighbors," Dingle muttered.

He dismounted and unsaddled. He picked up his unfinished picture, carried it to the stump where his brushes and paint tubes lay and set it down carefully, quite unaware of the fact that he'd gotten it upside down.

That afternoon, sitting cross-legged by the stump, a brush stuck behind each

big ear and one in his mouth, he was adding great splotches of purple to his sunset when a terrifying squawk shattered the silence. Whirling about, he saw a great cloud of feathers flying in the breeze. Ma Rattle's red rooster and the adopted hound had met in mortal combat.

Dingle yelled and flung a tube of paint. It hit the hound between the eyes, and he released his grip on the rooster. Squawking more from anger than pain, the rooster raced homeward.

After recovering the tube of paint, Dingle returned to his work of art and got quite a shock. A lot of those red feathers had blown against the picture, where they now clung in wild disorder to the wet paint.

It was plumb frustrating to have his work ruined twice: first by a nosey sheriff, and then by a feud between a dog and a rooster. Snorting angrily, Dingle squeezed out a big gob of paint from the tube and flipped it against the cardboard. It happened to be a bright orange. It spattered like a bad egg against a politician's bald head. The effect was startling, but Dingle failed to notice this, for the sound of approaching footsteps had come to his ears. Turning, he saw a fat little man in a blue store suit, climbing the trail.

The stranger mopped his pink face with a silk handkerchief and glared up at Dingle. A large, red ruby ring glittered on his little finger like a tail light on a caboose.

"Steepest hill I ever saw," he complained. "It'd better be worth my while coming up here, or I'll tell that sheriff off."

Dingle couldn't make heads or tails of this, so said nothing.

The stranger took off his straw hat and fanned his streaming face. Again the ring reflected the sunlight.

"Forgot you don't know who I am," he said. "J.X.B. Tucker."

He wrung Dingle's limp hand.

"President of the Amateur Artists Association," he added. "Visiting my cousin in River Bend. Joe Henning."

Dingle nodded feebly. Henning was the River Bend banker.

"Sheriff Trump told me about you," Tucker hurried on, "so I've come to look at your pictures. Might want to buy 'em."

DINGLE suddenly smiled. Here was a chance to get back some of his investment, and he guessed maybe Sheriff Trump wasn't such a bad sort, after all, sending this hombre around. It never entered his one-track mind that Trump had meant this to be one of his annoying jokes. Quickly Dingle herded the fat little man into the shack.

"Got three pictures," he said. "Let you have 'em all at a bargain."

J.X.B. Tucker took one look at the pictures of trees, mountains and sky-blue streams and shuddered.

"Junk," he said. "Just plain every day junk!"

Dingle felt his spirits sink. "Give me a dollar, and—"

Mr. Tucker snorted through his fat nose and stepped outside, mumbling something about being a fool. But suddenly he halted and stood rooted to the spot, his eyes frozen upon Dingle's "Sunset."

"Who did that?" he wheezed, pointing a trembling finger.

"I did," Dingle confessed sadly.

"Such boldness!" Mr. Tucker said in an awed voice. "Such coloring! What do you call it?"

Dingle swallowed. "Accident," he gulped. "I—"

"Needs a much stronger name than 'Accident.' Something with more violence. More action. We'll call it 'Earthquake.'"

Mr. Tucker put on his spectacles and blinked excitedly.

"Most original thing I ever saw. You even used real feathers. Wonderful! The thing hits you in the face. You can feel the earth shaking under your feet. Mr. Williams, how did you ever manage to brush on that orange as if it had been

blown right out of the picture by a great explosion?"

Stunned, Dingle could not find his voice at the moment.

"Never mind," Mr. Tucker said. "Don't blame you for not wanting to expose your methods. What do you want for it?"

Dingle was not one to take advantage of a crazy man, so he allowed the picture wasn't for sale at any price.

"Please let me take it back East with me," Mr. Tucker pleaded. "It's my greatest discovery. You wouldn't want to cheat me out of my moment of glory, would you?"

Dingle suddenly felt sorry for Mr. Tucker, who had climbed the hill through the hot sunlight. Besides, it was quite evident that the fat little gent had a loose screw, and likely the heat hadn't done him any good. So Dingle said kindly, "Take it along, if you want to."

Careful not to smear the paint, J.X.B. Tucker picked up his discovery and waddled away.

"Don't worry," he called back over his shoulder, "I'll return it."

Dingle dropped down on a stump and stared unhappily at the hound. "Seems a shame a nice old gent like him has to be off his handle," he muttered.

The next day, Dingle ran out of coffee, so he saddled up and rode down to Hedgehog. Tom Fergus invited him into his feed store.

"Just heard the River Bend stage was held up last night," Fergus said. "Two fellers did it. Wore masks. Took everything of value from the passengers. Money, watches—say, that fat feller who was lookin' for you yesterday was on board."

The mention of his visitor made Dingle forget the robbery for a moment. He hoped that no one would ever learn about that picture business. He was kind of ashamed that he'd let the little loco gent have that mess of paint and feathers.

"It's gettin' so it ain't safe for a man to step outdoors after dark," Fergus went on. "Dingle, maybe you hadn't ought to stay out there in that ole shack alone."

Dingle allowed no owlhooters would bother with him. He might have added that he had only four dollars and seven cents to his name. But he was kind of ashamed to admit that.

A WEEK later, Dingle ran out of money and swapped the three pictures to the storekeeper for another batch of grub. After this was gone, he reckoned he'd have to give up looking for Eddie's killer and find himself a job. As for painting another picture, he had lost interest in it, for he'd run out of bright colors.

He spent the next few days, riding about the country, scanning the back trails and hoping to find some lead to the murderer of Eddie Poole. But he found nothing. Then one afternoon, he returned home to find red feathers scattered about under the pines and Ma Rattle's rooster as dead as an old boot. The hound looked up at Dingle out of innocent eyes, but a few feathers protruding from his mouth told the story.

Anybody but Dingle Williams would likely have buried the rooster and let it go at that. But the one-track minded Dingle picked up the lifeless bird by one leg and climbed to the Rattle cabin.

He knocked at the front door. Nothing happened. He knocked again. Suddenly the door opened, and Ma stood facing him, her beady eyes glittering dangerously. Behind her stood Toot and Jute with shotguns in the crooks of their arms as if they might be on the verge of going rabbit hunting.

Dingle came right to the point. "My dog killed your rooster, so I figured I should offer to work a spell for you to pay for—"

Ma's eyes glittered brighter than ever. She raised a hand and brushed back her straggly graying hair. Something on her fourth finger gleamed in the light. The large, blood-red set of a

gold ring. "Git!" she said coldly, and shut the door violently.

Feeling kind of spanked, Dingle returned home. It was while he was digging the grave for the rooster that his one-track mind rounded a curve, and he recalled having seen the ring on Ma's finger.

Dingle dropped the shovel on his right big toe, but scarcely felt it. J.X.B. Tucker had worn a ruby ring on the little finger of his right hand. The fat little gent had been on the stage when it had been robbed. Maybe, Dingle reasoned, he had been searching too far a-field for the murderer of Eddie Poole.

That evening, he shut the hound in the shack and hid himself in some brush where he could keep a close watch on the Rattle establishment. Shortly after dark, Ma and the boys went out to the pole corral. Ma held a lantern, while Toot and Jute roped the two horses and saddled up.

Dingle didn't stay to see any more. He crawled from under the brush and rushed home. He saddled his hammerhead in a hurry and made sure he had his gun and plenty of shells. When Toot and Jute rode silently along the trail toward Hedgehog, Dingle followed. And the hound squeezed through a half-open window.

There was plenty of starlight, so Dingle didn't have any trouble trailing the two across open country. They weren't in any particular hurry. Also, they didn't seem to be worried about being followed.

They came to the dry bed of a creek and followed it northward. A mile or so farther on, they left the creek bed and cut through heavy brush and timber, their horses making enough noise to cover any sounds made by Dingle's mount.

Dingle felt pretty uneasy, for this was new country to him. He kept an ear cocked for any unusual sounds. The going became increasingly unpleasant. Branches had a way of whipping him in the face. He lost his hat, but didn't stop to look for it, for he had to keep within sound of the Rattle brothers, or likely lose them.

THEN, suddenly, there wasn't any sound ahead, and Dingle reined up sharply. He sat there, listening and sweating and hearing nothing but two limbs rubbing together overhead, while cold shivers tingled up and down his long spine.

At last, he slid to the ground and loosened the six in its holster. Cautiously feeling his way, he eased forward on foot.

It was darker than the inside of an ebony box. Just about the time he'd decided he'd lost the Rattles for sure, a horse cut loose with a snort right in Dingle's ear. It like to scared the pants off him. He'd come upon Toot's and Jute's mounts. He froze, expecting the worst to happen. Nothing did happen, so once again he eased forward.

A tree jumped up and hit him on the nose. He circled the tree, and then saw a light shining through a window. Dingle could think of but one thing to do, and he did it. He sneaked up to the window and looked into the cabin.

Toot and Jute were inside with their hats pulled down low over their eyes and bandanas hiding the lower part of their faces. They'd hauled a whiskered old gent out of bed, and one was holding him, while the other shook a big hairy fist under his nose.

But the oldster was plenty salty. Fury and stubbornness were written all over his face and smouldered in his eyes. He tried to jerk free and got his ears slapped hard for his trouble. Suddenly the old fellow snaked out a skinny arm, grabbed a bandana and ripped it off, exposing Jute's ugly face to the lamp light.

"Now they'll kill him sure!" Dingle thought wildy.

At that moment, Jute, his face filled with fear and anger, lifted his gun to club the oldster. The next thing Dingle knew, he had his own gun in hand. He fired through the window and saw Jute

bounce back against the wall and pile up in a corner.

Dingle turned his gun on Toot, but he didn't squeeze trigger. Cussing furiously, the oldster had torn away from the man, grabbed up a stove poker and now swung it at Toot's head. Toot went down under the blow like a wet towel slipped from a hook. Grinning, Dingle found the door of the cabin and went in.

The oldster was still cussing. "Never did have no use for them danged Rattles," he wheezed. "Always snoopin' around. They figured I had some money hid. Was aimin' to make me tell where. Hey, ain't you that Dingle feller?"

Dingle admitted that he was and explained about the ring and how he happened to show up in the nick of time.

"Hey," the oldster wheezed, "maybe you're smarter'n you look, after all." Then anger boiled up in him again. "The idea," he fumed, "them snaky cusses pullin' a man out of bed this time of night and threatenin' to punch out his eyes if he didn't tell where he keeps his money!"

Dingle agreed that such conduct wasn't exactly neighborly; then added as an afterthought that maybe they should take the outlaws to Hedgehog and turn them over to Marshal Fergus.

The next morning, Sheriff Trump was considerably put out with himself when Dingle and Tom Fergus herded the Rattle tribe into his office in River Bend. It had never occurred to him that these no-good Rattles had ambition enough to rob anybody. When the subject of a reward was mentioned by Fergus, Trump admitted that Dingle should have it. But there was one drawback. No reward had been offered for the capture of the outlaws.

HER puffy face as red as the ruby ring that had been her downfall, Ma Rattle was fit to be tied. She allowed that her two sons were too stupid to come in out of the rain.

"The idea lettin' that crazy Dingle jasper follow 'em," she yelled.

But she calmed down right quick and turned whiter than a bed sheet when she learned that Jute, who had wrongly figured he was about to cash in his chips, had confessed that it had been her idea to get rid of Eddie Poole.

"Ma figured he was spyin' on us," Jute had told. "She said we'd have to shut him up. So Toot and me waited for him one night along the trail, and I plugged him."

His usefulness at an end, Dingle left the sheriff's office and wandered aimlessly along the street. Now that he had uncovered Eddie's killer, he felt kind of lost. Crossing to the shade of the post office, he leaned against the corner of the building and put his big hands into his empty pockets. At that moment, Peggy and old man Holister came rattling into town in the Box H buckboard.

Seeing Peggy, Dingle's slow-moving pulse jumped a good forty ticks a minute. But when he recalled the business of raising a thousand dollars, he looked about for a place to hide. He just couldn't face Peggy and the old man without a red cent in his pockets.

The open door of the post office beckoned, and he rushed wildly toward it. It is likely he would have made it without Peggy's seeing him. But the hound, who had escaped from the shack and had trailed his master, came happily bounding forward. He and Dingle arrived at the open door at the same time.

Dingle went down, sprawling all over the place, and the hound let out a yip that could be heard a mile on a still day. Peggy lifted her golden head and saw a hatless, long-legged gent threshing about in the post office doorway and knew him for Dingle Williams. Believing that Dingle had been bitten by a mad dog, or had been smitten by some kind of a fatal fit, she leaped to the ground before the old man could restrain her and went racing in pursuit of the red-headed cowboy.

Startled by the commotion, the post master peered uneasily through the stamp window. But he saw nothing to

alarm him. Just Dingle Williams getting to his feet.

"Hey, Dingle," he said, "where've you been? Got some mail for you."

Dingle staggered to the window, and the post master shoved a pad toward him. "It's registered," he said. "Got to sign up for it."

Without realizing it, Dingle signed his name. His mind was still possessed with the idea of escape. Letter in one hand and a large flat package in the other, he headed for the back door. But Peggy grabbed his arm. "Dingle," she cried, "are you all right?"

She saw that he was and turned her blue eyes on the articles in his trembling hands. "Who's that letter from?" she asked suspiciously.

Dingle didn't know or care. He was still intent on vamosing. But Peggy had taken the letter from his nerveless fingers and was ripping it open.

"Dingle," she cried, "a check for a thousand dollars! Why, you've won first prize in an amateur art contest for the most original painting of the year! Dingle, why didn't you tell me you were an artist? What's in the package?"

Suddenly Dingle knew what was in the package, and a shudder ran over him. If Peggy's old man ever saw that painting with the rooster feathers stuck to it, thousand dollars or not, he'd likely never let Dingle set foot on the Box H, let alone marry Peggy. And if Peggy saw it—he shuddered again.

Turning quickly, he shoved the package into the post master's hands.

"Sent to me by mistake," he gurgled. "Return it to this J.X.B. Tucker. I'll write him later."

"Dingle," Peggy asked, "will you paint a picture for me after we're married?"

But Dingle didn't answer, for he was observing how nice she looked in a white silk blouse and a green skirt; and a one-track minded gent like Dingle Williams can think of but one thing at a time. • • •

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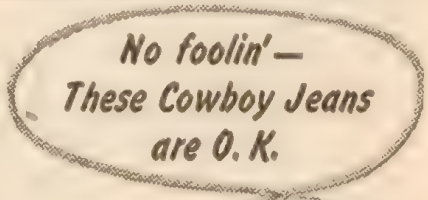

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ARROWS in the PASS

A Novel by FRANK CARL YOUNG

In the black of night Lewt Marshland must gamble on driving his herd through a land of starving Indians, well aware of how silent and deadly arrows could be

The buck started catlike into the trees, bloody knife poised

I

YANCEY BOONE, the grizzled mail-runner, had little or no chance to survive the Indian attack. An hour before, he had left a letter at Lewt Marshland's little ranchhouse far up wild Fox River Valley. Now Yancey loped his grulla gelding south through the thick grass of McBride's Hollow, on his way to the Montana Indian agency along Coon Creek.

Two Crow Indians waited tensely in the dark green screen of pine flanking the hollow. They were young, lean bucks. The long fringe on their buckskin leggings and short shirts stirred as they moved animal-like. Brown, savage eyes glittered covetously on the sleek animal the mail-runner rode.

Twenty hours earlier, the pair had crossed the Fox River from the Crow reservation with a small party of braves looking for some stray Marshland shorthorns. The tribe was desperate in its need of meat. These two had split off from the main party. When they spotted the lonely mail-runner, they had begun to stalk him.

In the nomadic heart of a Crow, it was high honor to steal a horse, even to kill for one. While one held their wooden-saddled ponies, the other fitted a two-foot arrow to his horn bow.

"Kill!" the horse-holder muttered gutturally, in the Crow tongue.

The sharp, bone arrowhead drew back, hissed as it was released.

Yancey Boone was in the middle of the hollow when the powerfully driven arrow hit. It tore through his leather vest, shoved through his flesh under his collar-bone. The stained bone head popped three inches out of his back.

The shock of it wrenched Yancey around in the saddle. His grulla lunged, and he lost his stirrup. Off-balance,

agony gripping him, he slipped from the saddle and fell.

He thudded hard on his side, rolled. There was a snapping sound, as the tufted end of the arrow snapped off. Pain that blinded exploded through him. Then he was frantically grabbing for his six-shooter.

He saw the two single-feathered bucks racing toward him across the grassy hollow. He caught the glint of the handsomely beaded saddle-blankets in the sunlight. Shifting his pistol to his left hand, he aimed awkwardly, fired—and missed!

He never had a chance to fire again.

With savage yells, the two leather-clad Crows dropped from their ponies onto his body. A knife flashed in the brown fist of one. The other raised up a short-shafted, stone-headed skull- cracker.

YANCEY screamed as the knife went into his chest. As the skull-cracker descended, he desperately twisted his head to avoid it. Not enough. It caught him glancingly above the ear, and for a split instant he had a flashing, vividly bright mental image of his daughter Leona's pretty face.

Then he went limp.

The buck with the knife suddenly pointed the blood-reddened blade toward the north. He cried out with surprise and warning. For pounding down toward them on a powerful bay horse was a lanky, loose-jointed rider, pulling his gun.

The bay under Lewt Marshland's sinewy legs was powerful. For an hour he had been pushing hard down the vast, wildly majestic Fox River Valley toward Hollister Wells. The settlement was the only place he had a chance to hire men in a hurry. For the letter Yancey had left had been like a bombshell. And suddenly he had to get his whole herd of shorthorns through Silver Rock Pass to market in New Buffalo.

Splashing across Pawnee Run, Lewt swung the bay into McBride's Hollow. Green pine and elder flanked the lush sweep of grass on either side. Ten years ago buffalo had browsed here, until white men had come.

The reverberating roar of a heavy calibered pistol came at the instant he swung around a bend in the hollow. Surprise and caution made Lewt check-rein the bay at once. Then he saw the feathered riders racing wildly through the tall grass in the distance toward a fallen man and there could be no mistaking the familiar mouse-colored mount of the mail-runner that now came trotting toward him, riderless.

"Yancey!" cried Lewt.

As the two bucks dropped on the mail-runner, Lewt's big spurs touched urgently into the flanks of his powerful bay. Yancey screamed then, and Lewt caught the flash of the blade, saw the stone-skull-cracker rise and arc downward.

Bands of fury squeezed around Lewt's heart. From his thin-lipped mouth came a curse, and he yanked his Colt .45 from its sheath. Shoving hard on the bay's neck, urging it on, he thumbed down the hammer and wished he had carried his Winchester rifle.

Lewt fired an instant after the buck with the knife discovered him. But the distance was still too great for small-arm accuracy. The best he could hope for was to scare them off before it was too late—if it wasn't already.

Firing again, he saw one Crow rip the mail-pouch from Yancey's shoulder. The Indian raced for his pony, legging fringes flapping. As he hit the back of his animal, Lewt drove another slug after him.

There came a hiss, and feathered death brushed the cheek of Lewt. The other buck had abandoned his stone hammer and fitted an arrow to his powerful horn bow. Loosening the shaft at Lewt's onrushing form, the Crow abruptly spun around. Flinging himself on his pony, he joined his companion in a race for the shelter of the woods.

Lewt came to a rushing, pounding halt

Lewt fired rapidly after the disappearing savages

in the grass beside Yancey's limp body. Leaping to the ground, he fired rapidly after the disappearing savages.

A trace of satisfaction came into his eyes, vanished. For the one bearing the mail-pouch seemed to jerk, then lean heavily against the neck of his plunging pony. Then both were gone into the trees.

Lewt held the spot with his pinched eyes for a moment. Then he shrugged. It was futile to follow. Before night the Crows would cross the Fox River to the east. With that they would be upon the vast reservation, to melt in with the hundreds of their tribe.

Holstering his gun, Lewt bent down over Yancey.

The mail-runner was unconscious and in bad shape. Using his knife, Lewt cut

off the arrow head protruding from Yancey's back and all but an inch at the other end while the man was still lost to pain. To have pulled it out would have caused him to bleed faster than it could have been staunched.

LEWT was badly pressed for time. The letter crackling in his shirt pocket seemed snapping orders to hurry. He had to get trail-hands quickly. But he couldn't possibly leave Yancey.

The tobacco cud that Yancey had been chewing lay in the grass beside his open mouth. Opening the mail-runner's shirt, Lewt used the moist cud to plug the knife wound in the man's chest. Using Yancey's blue neckerchief, he pressed it over the cud.

Catching up Yancey's grulla, Lewt took the canteen from the horn. Dribbling water over the mail-runner's face, he couched Yancey's head in the crook of one arm, then fed water to his lips.

Yancey opened his eyes. Stared. One hand went slowly to the swelling knob on his head. Recognition crept into his eyes.

"Lewt—Lewt Marshland," he whispered. His glance went beyond Lewt. "Where are they?"

"Gone, Yancey. I've got to get you home. Think you can manage your saddle for half an hour?"

The grizzled mail-runner kept watching the lean face of the man supporting him. To the few white men in Fox River Valley, Lewt was a singular personality. Lewt kept pretty much to himself, up in his ranchhouse, with his books, getting the education he wanted. In the three years since he had come in, Lewt had not been in the settlement of Hollister Wells more than half a dozen times.

Men didn't know how to figure him. They misjudged his aloofness. Thought him high-minded and "biggity." He didn't have many friends, since he had made little effort to form any friendships.

"I figure I can," Yancey answered Lewt's question and, with Lewt helping him, he got to his feet. "Thanks—for getting here in time, Lewt. Them damn Crow devils must have wanted my horse."

"Seems to me they want beef, too," said Lewt, boosting the mail-runner into his Frazier cow-saddle. "Now and then I find the hide of one of my Oregon shorthorns."

Yancey grabbed the horn of his saddle with one hand. The other he pressed hard against the bundled neckerchief over his chest wound. He kept staring at the thirty-year-old rancher, as Marshland mounted. Funny, a fine-looking man like that, living all by himself so much, just studying and letting his herd grow.

"Trouble is coming to this valley," Yancey said, "if them Crows don't soon get beef."

"That's the Indian agent's job," replied Lewt, as he headed for Boone's cabin at the foot of the western hills. "Why don't Major Sammott buy some? The Government's got him out here for that."

Wracked with pain, Yancey held his tongue for a time while Lewt led his grulla. Fox River Valley was a vast, beautiful wilderness of pine, elder and lush grass lying between the Blue Powder Mountains on the east and the Six Peaks range on the west. Altawan lay to the south, and far below that, semi-desert. Northward, the valley was all but blocked in by the incredible and majestic wall of the Rockies.

Not many white men lived here. Hardly any women. And most of these were in the little settlement of Hollister Wells.

Except for Marshland's there were no ranches running any sizable amount of cattle. Just scattered settlers, fur-hunters, the Indian agency along Coon Creek, and the vast reservation for hundreds of Crow Indians. Dissatisfied savages, not getting enough meat.

"Lewt," said Yancey, kicking the grulla up beside him, "maybe I oughtn't to tell you this, but you've obliged me pretty much. Major Sammott hates red-

skins worse than rattlesnake poison. Doesn't give a quarter damn about them one way or another. Yet the agency should be looking out for their interests. But the Major, he's got a grudge against the Government, and especially the army. He's all galled up inside, because they reduced him from colonel to major after the War Between the States. Half crazy, he is, I think."

"Why do you tell me this, Yancey?" asked Lewt, impatient to get on down to Hollister Wells for men.

"Because I somehow think it's got plenty to do with them Indians not getting their proper beef rations," replied Yancey, clinging hard to the saddlehorn. "Them Crows wasn't ever too unfriendly to us here. But their main dish always was buffalo. Since there ain't any more buffalo, it's got to be beef. And when there's no beef, something's just got to happen. Something right bad for any white man in Fox River Valley, and particularly any man what's got a sizable bunch of cows."

THE rancher nodded and jerked at his hat brim. He knew Yancey was warning him.

"Thanks, Yancey," he said, as they topped the rise that fell away to the bottomland where Boone had established his lonely cabin years before. "But all my cattle will be out of this valley in less than a week. I'm selling out."

Yancey looked at Lewt with surprise. "Selling out?" he asked. "Why I thought you were aiming to build that herd right up to about two thousand first."

"I was. But that letter you brought me today changes everything. Now I've got to get my seven hundred through the Pass and down into New Buffalo, pronto!"

"How come?"

Lewt hesitated. He was not a man to spread out his affairs for other men to pick over. Yancey was all right, of course, but he was also a gossip.

"Somebody I know down in Cheyenne needs twenty thousand dollars real quick," he replied. "But first I've got to get men to help me drive the herd."

"They might be right hard for you to find in this valley, Lewt," Yancey said significantly. "And don't forget. You got to get permission from Major Sammott, the agent, to cross the reservation to the Pass."

"I know about that painful detail."

II

BOONE'S CABIN WAS A squat log affair with broken wooden steps, snuggled in under the low branches of white spruce. Wisps of smoke curled out of the stone chimney at one end, and Lewt reasoned that Yancey's overworked married daughter, Leona, was making the mid-day meal for her lazy husband, Joe Gettel.

Pulling up at the hitch-rack, Lewt swung down. For a moment he eyed the sorrel tied there. It bore a Government "U.S." brand. He wondered if anybody from Fort Killman on the other side of Silver Rock Pass was inside, and why.

"Grab my neck," he ordered Yancey, as he helped him out of the saddle.

"Pop!" cried Leona, in dismay, as they neared the suddenly opened cabin door. "Pop, what happened?"

Lewt had met Leona Gettel only once before, in Hollister Wells. She was an attractive young woman of nineteen, hair long, and as black as a cricket's back. She was completely unselfish and deeply in love with her husband of a year. Some thought she was just too blame good for Joe Gettel.

At this moment young Gettel himself appeared in the doorway.

"Give us a hand here," ordered Lewt. "Leona, you better get some warm water ready, and some clean cloths."

"Looks like you walked into some trouble, Yancey." Joe Gettel spoke with a sulky, lazy drawl. His voice characterized him best—cynical, lazy, and wayward.

Lewt had known Joe's type elsewhere.

Young and boyishly good-looking, he had won Leona easily. He was tall and muscular, with a swaggering manner that always made Lewt think he was concealing something.

"A pair of Crows got me," explained Yancey, as they maneuvered him inside between them. "Lewt just about saved my scalp. Daughter, fetch my whisky!"

Adjusting his eyes to the comparative gloom inside, Lewt saw a compact figure standing near the side window. The man had straw-blond hair that contrasted sharply with his black shirt and pants.

He moved a little. Firelight gleamed on the big silver buckle of his gun-belt, on the row of cartridges draped around his thick hips. Cruel-type spurs were chain-strapped to his dusty boots, and they jingled as he shifted his feet.

"Well! Marshland!" The man spoke with sudden recognition and surprise. "What dragged you away from your education?"

Lewt knew Trace Devers. The man was now a sort of non-commissioned adjutant to Major Sammott at the Indian agency. But eighteen months back he had been a grub-line bum.

On a wintry night, Devers had stumbled into Lewt's isolated cabin. For a month Lewt had fed and helped him. Lewt had welcomed the companionship at first, but intimate conversation gradually revealed that somewhere along Devers' back-trail he had killed a man. Lewt was glad when Devers finally left him and he could get back to the preferred companionship of his books.

As Lewt eased Yancey onto the crude couch in the corner, he said, "I've got business in Hollister Wells, Trace. That answer your question?"

Devers didn't reply. Lewt straightened and for a moment watched Leona bustling anxiously around the wood stove with a kettle of water. Aside from a few furs that her husband sold now and then, the only income on the place was from the seventy-five cents a letter that her father got from the scattered settlers for running the mail once a week.

"Joe," asked Lewt, turning to Gettel, "want a job?"

He hadn't time to waste here, but riders were scarce in the valley. He couldn't be too particular. Hopefully he watched Joe Gettel straighten up from Yancey's unbuttoned shirt.

"What kind of a job would you give a man?" Gettel's tone made plain the general attitude of many in the valley toward Lewt's habit of keeping to himself so much.

"A riding job," replied Lewt. "I'm selling out over in New Buffalo, and I have to get men in a hurry to help me drive my herd."

LEWT noticed the quick surprise and alarm that swept into Trace Devers' eyes at the announcement. It made Lewt wonder.

Gettel wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. Shaking his head, he said, "Not for me. I'm not chewing dust and pot-grub for the few lousy dollars I'd get for it. Get somebody else—if you can."

It was as Lewt had expected. The man didn't want to sweat for anything. But what Lewt didn't like was the emphasized implication that he was going to find it so hard to hire anybody. And he couldn't get seven hundred head through the Pass and down into New Buffalo alone.

Pulling his gun, Lewt frowned and thoughtfully reloaded it with cartridges. The letter from Cheyenne crackled in his pocket. The words it contained passed vividly in his memory. His throat tightened, feeling the immensity of his obligation to the writer.

"I'll get men," he said emphatically, his eyes locking with Gettel's. Lewt turned to Trace Devers. "Tell Major Sammott I'll see him at the agency in the morning about permission to cross the reservation."

Devers fingered the corner of his mouth, as if upset about something. "I'm

afraid the Major will have to think that permit over some," he replied. "The Government has to consider everybody's safety, you know."

Lewt detected something thin and hollow. If only he could understand the cause of Devers' alarm when he heard that he was selling out.

"Never mind about my safety. Just have the papers ready."

After Lewt rode away, Leona turned to her husband. "Why didn't you take that job Mr. Marshland offered, Joe?"

Gettel turned on her savagely. "Don't tell me what to do!"

"But we need money, Joe."

"Sure! And lots of it, too! But not the few stinking dollars I'd get nursing his beef for three, four weeks. Get saddle-sores for him? Not me! Who does he think he is? Biggity, that's what! Been here three years, and he don't bother with anybody. Now he's in a hurry. Figures everybody should jump. Let him go to hell!"

Leona turned away. She understood Joe. He was always nursing a grudge. Always hating anybody who had it a little better than he did.

She went down on her knees beside her father with hot water and clean cloths. Yancey patted her head. Then he took a long drink of whisky. "Don't fret, child," he said. "I'll soon be up and around again with the mail."

Devers beckoned to young Gettel. The two went into a side room. They spoke low for five minutes, and neither Leona nor her father could catch the drift of it.

When they came back into the room again, Gettel took his battered Stetson from a peg. Then he picked up his rifle.

"We're riding to Hollister Wells," he announced. "I'll send Doc Baker out for the old man."

Leona was quick to smile. She thought she saw a change of heart in her husband. He was considering her father, anyway. And maybe he meant to accept Mr. Marshland's offer of a job, too.

"All right, Joe," she said. "That's fine. I've saved a few cents. Maybe it'll be enough to pay Dr. Baker."

Fifteen minutes after Lewt left, Trace Devers and Gettel mounted and followed his trail toward Hollister Wells. . . .

It was mid-afternoon when Lewt rode into Hollister Wells. The settlement was made up of not more than a dozen structures. The street was dusty and rutted, and the sidewalks were of thick spruce planks.

Babcock's Hotel was the biggest place there. It was near the springs, had a livery stable, bar, and what served as a post-office for the mail that came up on the Altawan stage-coach.

It had been six months since Lewt had been in town for supplies. He felt nearly like a stranger. For that was the way men and kids stared at him, as he rode the length of the street and drew up at the hitch-rack before Babcock's Hotel.

INSIDE at the desk, he asked Carew Babcock for paper and pen. The big English hotel-keeper watched as he wrote hurriedly at the far end of the pine counter. When he finished, Lewt handed him the addressed envelope and asked:

"How soon does the Altawan stage get in, Babcock?"

Babcock first studied the address on the letter, then replied, "Should be in any minute, Lewt. So this goes to John C. Marshland, Cheyenne, eh? Your brother?"

"My father. It's important. Make sure that it gets on the stage." Lewt paused to pull out his papers and tobacco. "Know of any riders around, looking for work?" he asked. "I need at least three in a hurry to drive my herd."

Babcock looked at him in surprise. "There's maybe a few, around the bar," he said, dropping the letter into a heavy leather pouch. "But they're mostly winter lay-overs." Babcock paused, began tapping a room key on the counter before him. "Running out of Fox River Valley, Lewt?"

"No. Why should I?"

"Understand the Crows are getting restless. Hear they aren't satisfied with reservation conditions. So Major Sammott says."

Lewt struck a match. "Maybe if Sammott saw to it that they got decent beef, things would be different."

"He's a hard man, Sammott is. Sure hate to have anything happen to make those red devils break out. They could wipe out all of us without much trouble."

Lewt turned away toward the porch door and the adjoining doorway to the bar. "I'll be back for a room later, Babcock," he said. "In the morning I'm riding out to see Sammott for a permit."

The bar was long and narrow. Mounted animal heads and brightly colored pictures of castles and knights hung on the walls. Tobacco smoke clouded the air, and through it Lewt, as he entered, saw the sleeve-gartered bartender look up with surprise.

"Well! Marshland! You sure must have suddenly developed a whooping thirst, to rack on into town for a change."

Lewt ignored the thrust. But he knew that it brooked no help to him. He could see that among those present.

There were only seven men in the place. Half of them recognized him, and he could hear them pass the word along to the others. The conversation died; the chill went on.

In his heart, Lewt blamed himself. But he hadn't meant it to be this way. It was just that he had liked his reading, his studying so much. Besides, they couldn't know that the books and seclusion had been like medicine to the sickening blow he had received in Illinois four years before.

"Order what you want, men," he said, hoping to thaw things out somewhat. "The drinks are on me."

Jake Leaf, the bartender, started the bottle along the line. All the strangers and one of the valley men accepted. The rest just ignored it.

Lewt bit his lips. He realized now just why he should have spent some time building up friendships. Now that he so desperately needed help from these men, he could see that it was going to be pretty hard getting it—if at all.

"Any of you fellows want a riding job for about a month?" he asked, fumbling with his glass, searching their faces hopefully. "I'll make the pay good. The grub will be the best. Won't be a long job, either. Got to get about seven hundred head of my stuff through Silver Rock Pass and down into New Buffalo in a hurry."

III

FOR several moments the barroom was as silent as midnight on Boot Hill. Suddenly a man sniffed and shoved back his glass. Giving Lewt a scornful glance, he walked outside. Two more followed him out.

Lewt swallowed hard. "You other fellows. How about it?"

Several drank the free whisky, but they made no reply. There was another long period of silence.

"Make it fifty dollars for four weeks, plus ten cents a head bonus for delivery, and you got yourself one rider."

It almost startled Lewt. The man who spoke was short and stocky. He needed a shave badly, and his clothes were range battered. But Lewt looked more at his eyes. They were blue, clear and steady.

"You're hired," he said. "What's your name?"

Before the man could reply, Joe Gettel came walking in. Lewt turned and saw that Devers was not with him. Devers was out on the porch, talking with the men who had just left.

The muscular Gettel moved past Lewt, braced his elbows on the bar beside the stocky rider who had just agreed to work for Lewt.

"Give me some rye, Jake," Gettel ordered. As he tipped the bottle to the glass, he spoke to the unshaven rider. "You'd do better to take on with a

longer job, stranger."

"I need work," replied the man

Gettel grunted contemptuously. "Sure. But who wants that kind of a job? That's badland between the Fox River and the Pass. Right across reservation land chuck full of Indians hungrier than vultures for beef. You'd be a fool, mister, to sign on."

"I'd be a fool to starve, too."

"Suit yourself," Gettel continued, raising his glass. "But you saw them others walk out on it, didn't you? They know Marshland. He don't give a damn for anybody. He's too high-minded. He only knows where to come when he's in a hurry to make a lot of money."

Lewt stood a yard from Gettel. His rage mounted with every discrediting word uttered by Gettel. He could take no more. With the back of his hand, he sent the whisky glass spinning out of Gettel's fingers. Sinking his fingers into the shoulder of Gettel's shirt, he spun him around.

"You've said enough! Get out of here!"

It almost seemed as if Gettel had wanted it this way. His sinewy fist shot out. It caught Lewt on the jaw, sent him reeling backward along the remaining length of the bar, toward the front wall.

For a moment Lewt stood there, eyeing old Yancey Boone's son-in-law. Gettel was wearing no gun. For that Lewt was glad. A thread of blood began to trickle from the corner of the fellow's mouth, and with that Lewt unbuckled his gun-belt and laid it on top of the bar.

"Mind it for me, Jake," he said, without taking his eyes from Gettel. "Something long overdue needs to be done here!"

Pent up, jealous vindictiveness gleamed in young Gettel's eyes. He seemed to have longed for this chance. Without a word or a warning, he flung himself wildly at Lewt.

This time Lewt was ready. He dodged the flailing charge, drove his fist deep into Gettel's midriff as he danced to the side. There came a grunt of surprise, a gust of punched-out breath.

Lewt sensed his fight must be more than a personal one. He must establish something here. Respect.

Gettel was his own height, but pounds heavier. And Lewt felt that extra weight, as Gettel whirled and smashed his fist against the side of his head.

It rocked Lewt back on his heels. His back hit the bar-roll. Lips tight, his chin went down. Suddenly he went boring in. Smashing aside Gettel's guard, he furiously crashed lefts and rights into the handsome, tooth-bared face.

Bone thudded on bone. Spurs jingled to the scraping of shifting boots. There was a sharp tearing sound, and Gettel's shirt suddenly parted from his shoulder to his waist, as Lewt's long-armed fist missed the bloody jaw and caught the open-throated collar.

BEWILDERMENT and rage glutted Gettel's battered eyes. He was stumbling backward now, toward the door. He was hitting Lewt, hitting him hard, but the lanky, loose-jointed rancher with the tight-lipped mouth and cold eyes seemed to shed the effects like a stone image.

Again Lewt drove his bruised knuckles against Gettel's mouth. Gettel's head snapped back. Staggering backward through the doorway, he lurched across the porch. For a moment he teetered at the top of the steps, then slipped, fell the several feet to the plank sidewalk.

Gettel came to his feet almost at once. Lewt never waited. He leaped down the steps, then jerked his head sideward, as Gettel swung at him wildly.

Lewt saw the opening. Wanting to end it quickly now, he summoned all his sinewy strength. Teeth grating, his fist shot out. There was a loud, cracking sound of knuckles on jaw-bone, a gasp from the crowd.

Eyes glazed, mouth open, Gettel went reeling limply off the sidewalk into the

dusty street.

"Look out! The stage!" cried someone.

Lewt saw it the same instant. The double span of horses on the incoming Altawan stage were mere yards from the front of the hotel. Dazed, Gettel was staggering directly into the path of their plunging steel-shod hoofs!

With cougarish suddenness, Lewt sprang into the street. Like powerful claws, the fingers of both his fists hooked into Gettel's vested shoulders. With strength born of desperation, he yanked his antagonist back to safety, just as the sweating horses brushed past and came to a plunging halt. The high front wheel stopped turning just behind Gettel's back.

"What the hell are you two doing?" yelled the enraged driver.

Lewt was about to answer when the door of the stage-coach opened. A trim ankle appeared on the iron step. A few inches of purple petticoat. Then a girl, and a pair of beautiful, hazel-brown eyes were flashing with a mixture of excitement and impatience.

"May I get out—or are you two brawling fools going to keep on blocking the coach door?"

She spoke curtly. But Lewt hardly noticed that. He was half spellbound by this sudden apparition of colorful loveliness facing him. His fingers relaxed on Gettel. His tongue flicked out to wet his bleeding lips, as if to say something, anything—apologetically.

"Driver, will you please move them?"

Her voice had music in it, culture, and breeding. Lewt forgot Gettel, and Silver Rock Pass, and stared like a boy in knee-breeches at the beautiful long brown hair beneath the traveling bonnet, at the slender, gloved hands and full young bosom.

"Sure will, Miss Farrell," replied the stage-driver, coming down monkeylike from the high front boot. "Move on, Lewt, and let the lady out!"

Lewt stepped back, and she stepped out. She turned her eyes on him for an instant. She didn't recoil from the sight of his battered and bleeding features.

"Thank you," she said, as Lewt moved back another step. "Now you better go and wash your face."

"Yes. Yes, of course." And even as the words stumbled from his mouth, Lewt knew that he sounded like a fool, had acted like one.

Then she was gone, her heels clicking across the porch of Babcock's Hotel. The driver had her luggage, following her, and Lewt heard him say to one of the curious questioners, "She's an artist. Come out here to paint Indians for a publisher."

Lewt rubbed his jaw and grinned. Then he turned around, remembering his fight with Gettel. Joe Gettel was gone.

Then Lewt saw him. Gettel had just been joined by Trace Devers, and the two were now diagonally across the street. Their horses were at the hitch-rack in front of the grocery store, and Devers was helping Gettel into his saddle.

FOR a moment Lewt considered crossing over. Then he changed his mind. He believed that he had established the respect he wanted in the settlement. Only he didn't like this strange intimacy between Trace Devers and Gettel. Devers, he knew, was a killer.

Frowning, Lewt headed for the water-trough outside the hotel. Bending down, he washed his battered face clean. The cool water refreshed him, cleared and stimulated his thinking.

Drying his face with his neckerchief, he watched the stablehands changing the teams on the stage-coach. Babcock came out with the mail-bag, tied it up on the front boot near the driver's rifle. Lewt wondered how he was ever going to keep the promise he had made in his letter to Cheyenne.

"That name you didn't get inside is Steve White."

Lewt turned at the familiar voice. It was the clear-eyed rider of the barroom.

With him was another cowpuncher wintering in town, a tall man with rope-callused hands and a red mustache.

"My name's just Pete," this man said, cocking one hand on his gun-shod hip. "If you can give me the same you offered Steve here, count me on. I like a man that fights your way—then saves the hombre's life."

Something warm crept inside Lewt. Something he had missed, living so much alone. He stared at the pair of them, measuring.

Finally he grinned and stuck out his hand. "You know," he said, "I think you boys really want to work."

They laughed, and Steve said, "I ain't known to run from it—like Joe Gettel."

Hope rekindled in Lewt Marshland. But he still needed at least one more man. A good man to handle camp wagon duties and attend to the cooking. He told Steve and Pete to spread the word around and to be up at his ranch not later than on the morning of the second day following, sooner if possible.

WISE INDIAN

AN old Indian in the northwest was consulted by men who were clearing the forests for the Alaska Highway. The old Indian said he knew the winter would be a long, cold one. Everybody took his word for it; Indians have a way of knowing.

One skeptic, however, got the sagacious redskin in a corner and asked him how he could tell. "Ugh," said the prophet, "winter be plenty cold. White man cut much wood."

—Harold Helfer

"I've still got to buy supplies and get a wagon," he told them, as they exchanged tobacco. "And tomorrow I've got to ride out and get a permit from Major Sammott."

"We'll be at the ranch tomorrow, Boss," promised the men, and turned back toward Babcock's barroom.

It was nearly sundown, and Lewt went down the street for his supper. He thought of Miss Farrell several times while he ate, and grinned, remembering his own awkwardness. When he went outside again, the shadows were gripping Hollister Wells.

The next hour he spent buying supplies for the range wagon he hired. As he moved past the lighted windows of the little mission house, a woman came out. She paused, then came swiftly to him and grasped his arm. It was Leona Gettel, Yancey's daughter.

"Mr. Marshland." Her voice was charged with anxiety. "Have you seen my Joe?"

"Didn't he come home?"

"No. Only Dr. Baker came. I'm worried, Mr. Marshland. I don't know why, but there's something I don't like about Trace Devers seeing Joe so much. It's only been lately, but I can't understand it, and Joe won't talk to me about it."

Lewt found it hard to tell her about his fight with her husband. He knew she loved Gettel, perhaps foolishly. As he talked, he realized it hurt her to hear him tell what he had had to do to Gettel.

"I feel sorry for you, Leona," he said, as he led her to where she had left her horse and spring-wagon. "But Joe does need straightening out. Maybe I've helped you by whipping him, maybe not. I don't know. I sure hope the best for you. Tell Yancey good luck."

Lewt left her and walked solemnly back toward the hotel. What could Trace Devers be up to? Something told him that it did not present any good for him, Lewt Marshland. If only the man wasn't the assistant of Major Sammott!

Getting his key and gun-belt back from Babcock, Lewt went up to his

room in the hotel for some much needed sleep. He shook his head, when he thought of a female artist coming to paint savage Indians. And all alone, too.

IV

AT THIS hour, Silver Rock Pass was a wilderness channel of moonlight and shadow. On either side rose the sharp, majestic walls of the Blue Powder Mountains. To the north and west lay the vast lands of the Crow reservation, their conical skin tepees scattered like ivory cones in the moonlight as far west as the Fox River.

Like a carelessly thrown ribbon of silver, Coon Creek wriggled along the southern boundary of the reservation to empty into the Fox River. Its source bubbled up out of the rugged fastness of the Blue Powders just south of the Pass. Along its southern bank, among the rolling foothills, half-way between the river and the mountains, lay the Indian agency, with its cabin, barn, and big pole corrals meant to hold cattle for distribution to the tribes.

It was a lonely place. And Major Clane Sammott hated it. Hated its isolation, hated its purpose, and especially hated what it personally symbolized for him—demotion and exile.

It wasn't late. Just five minutes to eight. But Sammott knew the bullets would begin again at the stroke of eight. They always did, every third night, as regular as breathing.

He sat alone in the big, dirty, log-walled central room of the cabin, working over a chess problem. At forty-five, he was a big man, built like a buffalo, with great shoulders and a humpish sort of back. He had wiry, short-cropped silver hair and a dark, silver-streaked beard that resembled General Grant's.

His big fist grabbed his imaginary opponent's red pawn. But he didn't move it. His steely, gleaming eyes narrowed. His mouth became a threadlike slit, and his powerful jaws clamped tight with the terrific tension within him.

The bullets. They never failed to come. Coupled with the uncertainty of an investigator coming from Washington at any hour, his nerves were nearly at the breaking point.

With a curse, he suddenly swept the chessmen from the board. Kicking back his chair, his massive chest swelled out his dirty white shirt. Stamping across the room, he took his violin from the closet behind the trading counter in the hope of relaxing his tension.

He brought the bow down on the strings harshly. In the same severe way that he had commanded his troops through years of struggle in Pennsylvania, Maryland and Virginia. No smoothness, or facility. No feeling of consideration or appeal. Just brute determination, careless ferocity, complete disregard for the thing he commanded and controlled—like his men during the war.

At Gettysburg, an officer once had warned him against the risk of being shot in the back by his own men.

Sammott's nervous eyes went toward the clock on the fireplace mantel. One minute more. And the music didn't help.

Pi-in-nngg!

It was the first. The rifle bullet glanced off the outside rock chimney, whined across the corral in the moonlight. Dropping his violin, Major Sammott pulled his service Colt.

He didn't bother to blow out the lamp. It made no difference. In a whole year, the mysterious rifleman hadn't once tried to kill him—just come close.

The second bullet drilled a neat hole through the upper pane of the front window, buried itself into the floor near the violin. The angle told Sammott the unknown sharpshooter was in the hills tonight.

Pistol in hand, Sammott paced the three rooms of the agency. Bullet after bullet tore into the walls, the chimney, the door. Twenty minutes of it. It was like a siege. He was a prisoner. Tormented. And he didn't know why. That was the worst hell of it!

He made no effort to locate his tormentor. He had tried that long ago. He used to race outside, plunge into the hills, tear through the brushy slopes half a night at a time.

The result had always been the same. No track, no trace of the cunning rifleman showering his post with bullets that always came close but never killed.

IT KEPT up for ten more minutes. Panting with rage, Sammott suddenly flung open the door. Running out into the moonlight, he threw back his head, yelling and firing his gun insanely at the hills.

"Damn you! Come down! Get where I can see you, you crawling, yellow-bellied son-of-a-skunk!"

Cursing, he stamped back inside. Closing the door, he holstered his pistol. His eyes were wild, fierce. From a cabinet, he took a bottle of brandy. Gulping from the neck of it, he flung himself into a rawhide chair, legs stretched out. Beard on his chest, his eyes kept staring at the safe in the corner behind the trade-counter. In it were thousands of dollars for reservation supplies which he had never purchased.

He had his plan. When he had the right amount, he would head for Vancouver, take a boat for South America. He'd worked toward that ever since the beginning, defrauding the Government for years. All he needed was one last fat Government allotment check for beef. He had already requisitioned it, and any day now it should—

Suddenly Sammott's staring eyes shifted. Toward the door. The sound was unmistakable. Hoofbeats, growing louder, seemed headed for the agency cabin.

Sammott slammed the bottle down on the table. Pulling his gun, he quickly reloaded it. Getting to his feet, he moved to the wall beside the door.

Perhaps, at last, his unknown tormentor dared to come for the finish! But the next instant another bullet splintered into the log wall, destroying that hope. And then he thought of the unnamed investigator who was due to arrive from Washington at almost any time.

The hoofbeats came rataplaning right up to the long hitch-bar outside the door. Sammott cocked his pistol, poised it. At the same time, there came an abrupt cessation of the bullet attack from the hills. It was puzzling.

"Open up, Major! It's Devers."

Sammott's shoulders relaxed. Holstering his gun, he opened the door. When he saw Joe Gettel, his eyes narrowed with distrust.

"It's all right, Major," Devers quickly explained. "Gettel's going to fit in with our ideas."

The lamplight splashed Gettel's battered features. The Indian agent asked, "What hit you? An ax handle?"

Gettel cocked back his hat, then leaned his rifle against the Major's chair. Until this night, the bearded agent had been merely a hard, bitter man to him. But Trace Devers had told him enough on the ride out to give him fresh conceptions of the demoted army officer.

"It was Lewt Marshland," answered Devers. Removing his hat, his eyes shone with anxious urgency below his long, straw-yellow hair. "Sammott," he went on, wiping his mouth, "we've got to work faster now than we first thought. Marshland's going through the Pass to sell out over in New Buffalo right away!"

"What?" exclaimed Sammott. "He can't!"

Devers quickly explained what he knew. When he detailed the fight in town, Gettel turned away, and without being invited, helped himself to the Major's brandy.

The news upset Sammott. His beard twitched, and his eyes smoldered, as he paced the agency floor.

"That herd has got to stay here!" His tone was that of an enraged command. "If Marshland takes that herd outside to sell, I'm stuck! This time I've got to have beef in the corrals before I get the

Government money. That letter I got a week ago from Washington claims that an Indian affairs investigator is already on the way out here. They never pulled that before. But he'll have the check, and I'll get it if the papers are in order and he can see the herd. There's got to be about seven hundred and fifty head."

"Nobody but Lewt Marshland has a herd that size around here," interrupted Gettel.

The Major's eyes flashed. "We know that! Keep quiet!"

DEVERS watched the two men speculatively. He had his own treacherous plan to consider. It hadn't been too hard to win the Major's confidence. They had the same kind of ideas, and the Major now trusted him. The fool! All he was waiting for was for Sammott to get possession of the big check the Government inspector was bringing. Once Sammott had it, he'd force the agent to endorse it over to him, make the Major give him the combination of the safe in the corner where there were thousands of dollars for supplies the Major had never purchased. Once he had all that, he'd kill Major Sammott!

"I've got to have beefs right in the corrals," the Major repeated. "I've got to prove that the damn red devils are getting fed, no matter what they say to that investigator when he comes."

"At ten cents a pound on the hoof, that check ought to come to about fifty or sixty thousand dollars."

Joe Gettel had spoken out of turn again. This time the Major flushed red with rage, then spat out an oath directed at Devers.

"Talk, Devers!" he snarled. "Where does this mouthy louse fit in with our plan to force Marshland to sell cheap to me? He knows more than I like him knowing!"

Devers thoughtfully rubbed his thumb across the brass backs of his cartridges.

"Sammott," he said gravely, "we know Lewt's going to try to sell out quickly over in New Buffalo. Lewt knows how low Government rates are, so he'll keep right on through the Pass into New Buffalo to get rail-head prices. That is, if he gets your reservation permit, of course. But you've got to have that herd. I know that. It's the only one around. And you've got to get it in a hurry, too, if you want that fat Government check for yourself." Devers paused, looked at Sammott tauntingly. "Unless, maybe," he added, "you've had a change of heart toward the army and the Government."

Sammott's mighty fist crashed down on the arm of his chair. "My mind's the same!" he cried. "Demote me, will they? Exile me to this rat-infested Indian nursery! I'm going to get plenty out of that allotment money. Plenty! Even if we have to kill Marshland, forge his name to a bill of sale, and steal his damn herd if he refuses to sell at any price!"

"That's where Joe Gettel comes in," interrupted Devers. "For the right cut out of that check, Joe might be willing to handle that killing detail, should Marshland refuse to sell."

Gettel shifted uneasily, as if the idea of killing was not one entirely of his own creation. The Major eyed him with fresh interest. There were possibilities in this muscular, boyish-faced man, after all. More than he had at first realized.

"When is Lewt Marshland coming for permit papers?" he asked.

"Tomorrow morning," replied Gettel.

Major Sammott got to his feet. A ghoulish grin twitched his beard. From his cabinet, he took out extra glasses. Pouring brandy in them, he handed one each to Devers and Gettel. As if saluting a pair of subordinate officers in his tent on a battlefield, he raised his own glass.

"To tomorrow!"

At the same time, up in the hills, a thin, tall man with hollow, deep-set eyes shoved his rifle into his saddle-boot. His slender hands grabbed his reins, and he swung up into saddle. For a moment

he looked down on the moonlight agency buildings below, his intelligent, delicately chiseled features charged with unforgiving vengeance.

Following the ridge for a mile, he turned his pony toward the west, dipped down toward the grassy flats and Hollister Wells beyond.

He would have to buy more ammunition again. . . .

IT WAS past midnight. Lewt lay deeply asleep in his bed in Babcock's Hotel. There was a smile on his lips, there since his last thoughts of Miss Farrell just before falling asleep.

Suddenly there was a sharp, urgent, fist-thumping on the room door. Lewt stirred, blinked awake. Rolling on his side, he grabbed his pistol from his belt on the chair. His first thought was of Joe Gettel and Trace Devers.

Moonlight striped in through the window, patterning a creamy rectangle on the plank floor. In his bare feet and gray underwear, Lewt moved quietly to the door. One hand on the bolt, he asked, "Who is it?"

"You needing a good cook and wagon hand, Mr. Marshland?"

Lewt smiled. Pulling the bolt, he opened the door. In the lamplit hallway stood the tall, buck-skin clad figure of Ed Emory. Emory was a Fox River hunter who bought lots of ammunition but never seemed to bring down much game.

"I sure do, Ed," replied Lewt. "Come in."

Emory moved into the darkened room, his moccasined feet barely making a sound. There was the gentle flapping of fringed buckskin, the smell of pine and a pipe-smoker's breath.

Lewt closed the door. Lighting a lamp on the washstand, he watched Emory pull down the window shade. Then he met the strange, deep-set fire in the tall man's hollow eyes. Emory was a quiet, pleasant sort of man, but strange, and this midnight visit was not just like him.

"Came in to town for more ammunition," explained Emory, stuffing his battered pipe with tobacco. "Met a pair of riders named Pete and Steve. Said you needed a cook and wagon man. Heard about your fight with Gettel, too, Lewt."

V

LEWT MARSHLAND sat on the edge of the bed and watched the middle-aged hunter. He was glad to have a man like Ed Emory with him. He knew Emory a little better than most did in the valley. At times Emory would drop in to exchange philosophical theories on the war that was ended, on books, life.

"Surprised to hear you're selling out so sudden, Lewt," Emory went on, drawing hard on his pipe. "Thought you figured on letting that herd grow bigger."

Lewt trusted Emory. They had shared many a confidence before. Going to his shirt on the chair, he took the letter from his father and handed it to the tall hunter.

Emory read:

My dear son,

I hate to burden you with any of my problems. I know you have had enough, with your disaster in Illinois. But I feel I must tell you this, and if it is possible for you to help in any way, I would be glad.

Last year I made my usual contracts to buy Texas steers, here in Cheyenne. But my investments in the East took a surprising reverse, and I am about twenty thousand dollars short on my contract obligations.

These Texas drovers are hard business men. They have to be, when they get up here after such a long drive. They depend on the contracts I made with them. If I fail to keep them, I'm through, ruined, as far as they are concerned. They might even do worse, if I don't take their stuff.

If I can just get fifteen, twenty thousand dollars in time, it will be enough to hold things together for me until I get in the clear again. I don't like telling you this, Lewt, but the case is one of desperation. I wanted you to know, if anything happened to me.

Good luck, and I hope you've forgotten your old losses back in Illinois by now.

As ever,

Your dad

Ed Emory carefully folded the letter and handed it back to Lewt. There was anxiety in the lean hunter's eyes, and sympathy.

"I understand, now," he said.

Lewt rubbed the letter fondly. "I'd plow through red hell for him," he said. "Some years ago I met a girl and we planned to marry. I started a farm in Illinois for her. There was a drought. Lost everything—cattle, grain, the whole works. The girl, too, and there I was, all but hopeless. Dad—well, he came through big. Told me about this valley and gave me enough Oregon shorthorns to start a herd." Lewt paused, rubbed at his mouth. His eyes were a little misty. "Now you know why I'm selling out fast. I couldn't let him down."

Emory stood up. Emptying his pipe, he stuffed it into his pocket, then looked admiringly at Lewt. "I figured it would be something like that," he said. "And here's something for you to think about. I saw Trace Devers and Joe Gettel at the agency tonight. That never happened before. Not before your fight with Gettel."

Lewt's eyes narrowed. What could Gettel want at the agency? Surely not work. Whatever it was, association with Trace Devers would color it bad.

"Thanks, Emory," he said. "Gettel tried to block my hiring men today. Glad you took notice of those two being out to see Sammott tonight."

Lewt noticed the glittering hardness come into Emory's eyes at mention of the Major. He had his own ideas concerning the talk of the mysterious rifleman that peppered the agency so tormentingly. Emory had been in the War. For two years he had been a prisoner in a dirty, diseased prison. On several occasions at the ranch, Emory had told of his terrible experiences on the picket line, and especially of the unnecessary death of his beloved brother there, due to the fatal inefficiency of a blundering, hard-headed officer whom he never named.

"I sometimes get over around Coon Creek at night," admitted the tall hunter. He started for the door, padding softly as a cougar on his moccasined feet.

"About every third night, I'd say," murmured Lewt.

Emory turned. The eyes of the two men met. Tacit understanding passed between them.

"About that often," Emory answered, flatly. "When are you starting that drive for Silver Rock Pass?"

"Soon as I get my permit from Sammott, and pull in most of the strays. The herd's not scattered so much. I've got my wagon and supplies over in Martin's livery stable. You can drive all the stuff out to my ranch in the morning."

"All right, Boss."

Emory opened the door and was gone, silently as a savage on moss. Lewt turned back to his bed, his mind more restless now than before.

If Trace Devers and Joe Gettel were at the agency, what might he expect from the Major tomorrow?

IN THE morning, after Lewt returned from breakfast, he found Babcock waiting for him. The big English hotelkeeper was standing in the stable-yard, smoking, his head bent thoughtfully. Babcock had a calico pony saddled, with a smaller pack animal standing beside it. It puzzled Lewt, for neither horse was his own, and the pack animal had tied on it a small folding, canvas chair, as well as an easel and a suitcase.

When Babcock saw Lewt, he acted uneasy, like a man who has taken a privilege before asking.

"Lewt," he said, scratching the back of his head, "you know Miss Farrell is an artist? Commissioned to paint Indians?"

"I heard that yesterday."

"Well," Babcock went on, not looking directly at Lewt, "this publisher told her to make arrangements out at

the Crow agency and then work out on the reservation from there. Last night I promised Miss Farrell you would escort her out there."

"What!" exclaimed Lewt. "Why the devil did you do that?"

"Well, you're headed out there, aren't you? She'd never find the place, and with some of the bucks off reservation right now—"

"But I'm in a hurry," protested Lewt. "Why, she probably can't ride worth a hoot, and she's not sociable. Besides, what the dickens does she want to paint for, crawl around among them savages, a woman like her? Why, she ought to—"

Lewt broke off suddenly. For all at once Miss Farrell was three yards away on his left, having come from the hotel's side door into the yard unexpectedly.

"Good morning," she said, in her cheerful, musical voice. "I see Mr. Marshland has agreed to accompany me, as you promised, Mr. Babcock. How nice of him."

"But, Miss Farrell!" protested Lewt. "I—it's not—"

"Oh, everything is all right, Mr. Marshland," came her quick interruption, as she moved gracefully toward the calico. "I've quite forgiven you for barring my way last night. Mr. Babcock told me about you, and I'm sure we'll be friends. Are you ready?"

Lewt glanced helplessly at Babcock, then shrugged resignedly. Turning to hold her stirrup, Lewt replied, "Ready," and saw her swing lightly into saddle.

A ranch girl couldn't have done better. And she was dressed practically, too, he noted, in a dark, split riding skirt and wide felt hat, black riding boots. Over her white shirt-waist, she wore a fringed, skin jacket. Her wavy brown hair was gathered behind her neck with a yellow ribbon, the long, curling ends mantling her slender shoulder and shimmering in the sunlight.

Lewt swallowed, looked away, and at the last faint memory of another girl in Illinois dissolved forever.

They rode out of Hollister Wells together, Lewt leading the pack animal. For the next fifteen minutes, they said nothing.

It was a beautiful morning. Far ahead the Blue Powders penciled a wavy purple band against the sky. To his left Lewt could clearly see the broad notch that was Silver Rock Pass. For a space he forgot his lovely companion, his mind on his desperate father in Cheyenne—and Major Sammott.

Suddenly her stirrup was knocking against his own.

"It is beautiful, isn't it?" she said. "You are to be envied, having all this to yourself, Mr. Marshland."

He regarded her with fresh interest. Her eyes were so clear, so honest. There was no sign of pretension about her.

"Call me Lewt, Miss Farrell. It's easier." He was again approving of her riding ability, which surprised him. "This valley has been like a haven and medicine to me for three years. No doubt Babcock also told you about my books and efforts to educate myself."

She looked at him seriously, nodded, then gently touched his arm. "Yes, Lewt, he did," she said. "Keep it up, but try not to forget that you are human, too. You need people in your life, as well as knowledge. You found that out yesterday, I understand."

Lewt marveled at her. She had such a pleasant, tactful way of getting right under and into the thing. For the next hour they rode close together, talking of many things.

BY NOONTIME, she had amazed him with her knowledge of Indians. Her early years had been spent in the West with her father, a prospector. Before her mother died, while she had been desperately sick and unable to care for her, the child had lived a year with the Teton-Sioux tribe, learning to cook, to ride, and especially to understand and love the wild beauty of all natural things.

"I understand now why that publisher sent you out here, Miss Farrell," said Lewt, as they drew near the Fox River crossing just below Coon Creek. "Still it will be a risk. I don't think Major Sammott will allow it."

The name of the agent seemed to cloud her eyes. "Sometimes we must take great risks to do the things we want to," she replied. "I have always wanted to do something for the Indians —like this."

It was the guarded way in which she spoke that made Lewt wonder. "Do you know Major Sammott?" he asked.

"My employers told me about him," she replied. "I'm sure I'll be able to deal with him."

There was a tone of anger in her voice that puzzled Lewt even further.

They were only a few miles from the river now. Lewt could see the foothills rising up beyond it. Not far to the north was the lower boundary of his own holdings. Ahead, between them and the banks of the river, lay a dark stand of tall elder and river birch.

The trail through it was narrow. Churchlike silence closed in on them. Bars of sunlight broke through the upper branches, and Lewt was forced to keep the horses down to a walk.

They traveled in single file, Lewt in the lead. On the leaf-matted trail, they hardly made a sound. Only the creaking saddles and chattering birds broke the impressive silence.

"It makes you think of childhood prayers and God," whispered Miss Farrell reverently.

Suddenly Lewt threw up his hand to halt. They were on the verge of breaking out of the woods. Through the opening of the trail ahead could be seen the clearing between the wood's edge and the river bank.

"Smoke!" Lewt whispered ominously.

The next moment he was swinging quickly out of his saddle. "Dismount!—quick!" he ordered, pulling his six-gun. "Lead your horse after me!"

Holding the reins, Lewt carefully pulled his bay and the pack-horse into the trees flanking the trail. Puzzled, Miss Farrell followed with her calico pony.

"What is it?" she asked, watching Lewt tether the animals to a tree behind a dense clump of brush, out of sight of the clearing.

Lewt pointed. They were only a dozen yards from the edge of the clearing, and through an opening in the branches, he indicated the smoke winding up on the other side of a grassy hummock.

Now and then a single-feathered head rose above the ridge. Brown fists rose to hungry mouths with partially cooked red meat. An Indian pony whinnied, and voices came in an excited, jabbering dialect that he couldn't understand.

"That's a small party of Crow bucks," Lewt explained anxiously. "They're off reservation, like the pair I told you I met yesterday. They've butchered another of my beefs. There are at least six of them. If they spot us, anything might happen. The tribes are in a bad mood on account of not getting sufficient meat through the agency, and they're pretty dangerous in that mood."

A little of the pink color went out of Miss Farrell's face. Her bosom rose and fell heavily, and fear was acute in her eyes as she glanced at Lewt beside her.

"They speak Dakota tongue," she said, again amazing Lewt with her knowledge. "I can't get it all, but they mean to kill, and keep killing, if they don't get more meat for their wives and babies. They speak of the white chief at agency. They hate him. They're mad about all your cattle, which they can't hunt, can't eat, even though it's on their own lands, and close to them." Miss Farrell paused, laid her hand on Lewt's wrist that was holding his Colt .45. "Lewt, they talk about massacreing unless the Government sees that they get enough meat within a week!"

VI

SWEAT beaded Lewt's forehead. Warning his companion to silence, he kept his eyes riveted on the hummock, on the moving heads on the other side of it. Nothing else mattered right now like escaping discovery.

"Stay behind me and don't move or even talk any more," he warned the girl. "If they come through the woods this way when they're finished, we'll not have one chance in a thousand of escaping them!"

For the next half-hour they remained almost motionless, cramped. The muscles in Lewt's back and legs ached. The gun in his hand felt heavier than a rifle. A dozen horrible possibilities kept pounding in his brain. Savages in a warlike frame of mind would afford no white woman anything but the most unspeakable treatment.

At last the party of bucks moved toward their ponies. All but one. The others carried bloody sections of raw meat, and Lewt could see them stringing the portions to their wooden saddles.

They mounted, six of them. Lewt held his breath, his pulse hammering, his fingers cold on the butt of his gun. Which way would they go?

He felt Miss Farrell's fingers touch his elbow. He caught the sweet scent of the perfume she used, heard her quick, anxious breathing, felt the warmth of it on his neck. It made him fear for her more than ever.

Lewt's straining eyes nearly bulged from their sockets. The mounted savages were no more than twenty-five yards away. With a sudden outburst of jabbering, they walked their ponies toward the north, away from the woods.

All but one.

This last lingered to knife out the horns of the dead steer. Lewt could see only his head and shoulders, on the other side of the hummock. The buck was thick-muscled, and young.

"They've gone!" gasped Miss Farrell, with relief, failing to note the one who had lingered, being behind Lewt.

Lewt's heart nearly stopped beating. At the sound of the woman's voice, the Crow suddenly stiffened. Now he stood erect, his bronzed features turned toward the woods, charged with alert concentration.

For two full minutes he stood that way. Wolfish. Eyes rolling. The fringe on his buckskin shirt moved slightly in the gentle breeze sweeping up from the river.

At last the buck stooped down again, to work his knife on the bloody steer skull.

At this instant, a wood-spider came dangling down on his thread from a branch, directly above the calico pony ridden by Miss Farrell. Its black legs squirmed in front of the calico's eye, then swayed against the animal's eyeball. The horse abruptly threw up its head with fright, snorted, then whinnied in loud protest.

The buck savage sprang up over the hummock of grass. His bloody blade glistened in the sunlight. Face twisted fiercely, eyes on the woods and the spot where Lewt and Miss Farrell crouched tensely, he came loping forward to investigate.

Lewt could have killed him instantly with his pistol. But he dared not. The roaring crash of his gun would have brought the rest of the party back on the gallop. He must think entirely of the woman gasping behind his back. Only of her. Of nothing else!

Turning, he quickly shoved his pistol into her hand. "If the others come back," he whispered, "use it—on yourself!"

He had no time to catch the look of gratitude that sprang into her eyes. Or the expression of concern over him that suddenly swept over her. His whole attention, his every sense, was now desperately centered on the savage bounding up the narrow trail toward them.

The buck slowed, started catlike into

the trees, bloody knife poised. Lewt's throat dried up. He never moved, waiting for the awful instant of discovery.

And then it came.

THE savage's eyes suddenly froze on the rumps of horses exposed from behind the concealing brush. He halted, gulping in breath. The next instant there came a tearing of branches, as Lewt sprang apelike from his crouched position.

Before the surprised Crow knew what had happened, his knife wrist was vised in Lewt's steel-tight fingers. The cry in his throat gurgled into a soft grunt. For Lewt's other fingers were tightened hard on the bronzed neck, even as the two went crashing down on the leafy floor of the woods.

It was a silent, writhing death struggle. Lewt wanted no outcry, no sharp sound to bring back the others. With the unbreakable tenacity of a bulldog, he kept the fingers of his right hand locked deeply in the thick-muscled throat.

The Crow choked, eyes bulging. His knife arm trembled, as he strained against Lewt's braced hand, trying to drive the blade into Lewt. Again and again he drove his buck-skin clad knee into Lewt's stomach,his groin, ribs. His free hand wrenched frantically at the fingers throttling him.

Like cougars locked in battle, they thrashed into the undergrowth. Pale, shocked, eyes staring, Miss Farrell stood flattened against the bole of an elder, the pistol in her fingers. She didn't cry out. She couldn't. She was all but paralyzed with fear and horror at the primitively vicious life-and-death struggle taking place almost at her feet.

Lewt felt his strength ebbing. The Crow was now above him, thighs locked about his hips. Blood was running down Lewt's fingers, where he had the Indian by the throat. The savage's agonized face was twisted and wormy with bulging veins, his eyes red and swollen, his feeble, gasping breath a stench in Lewt's face.

Seconds ran into minutes. And gradually, slowly but surely, the Crow's knife-filled fist came down above Lewt's chest. Straining every muscle, his fingers wet with sweat on the bronzed wrist, Lewt tried to hold that fist back. But the hard, wilderness life of the savage made him the stronger. The tip of the blood-reddened knife drew closer to Lewt's heaving chest.

"Lewt!" cried Miss Farrell. "Lewt! Oh, Lord, I—I—"

The message in her anguished voice fed fresh strength into Lewt's tension-wracked muscles. For an instant he held back the descending blade. But now the whole weight of the choking Indian above him was back of it.

"Don't sh-shoot, Miss Farrell!" grunted Lewt. "The o-others—"

Teeth grinding, Lewt's jaws shook with terrific strain. Suddenly he broke it, let the Crow collapse flat upon him. Miss Farrell gave a sharp gasp, certain the blade was buried in Lewt's heart.

The savage did not get up from Lewt's body. There was a twitch, then a tremor, that shook his buckskins. Then the buck's raven-haired head slumped up against Lewt's, the eagle feather bending against Lewt's shoulder.

A long breath gusted from Lewt's parched mouth. With a heave, he rolled the savage's body off his own. Miss Farrell gasped again. The knife was buried in the Crow's chest, his fist still clasped around the hilt!

Lewt had wrenched that fist around at the last instant when he let the savage drop upon him.

"Oh, Lewt!" sobbed Miss Farrell. "I—I'm going to cry!"

She dropped down on her knees beside him, suddenly, the pistol falling from her weakened fingers. Bracing himself to a sitting position, Lewt touched her shoulder.

"It's all right. Go ahead, Miss Farrell. I understand."

She quickly crept closer to him. Shaking like a leaf, she touched her fingers to Lewt's cheek, then suddenly dropped her anguished face to his shoulder and broke into sobs that shook her whole body.

Lewt's arms went around her. Tendrils of her long hair brushed his sweated face. He swallowed, wet his lips to say something, but no words would come at first.

"You—you're just unnerved," he said at last, patting her back. "For a few seconds there, it looked like the buck was going to make it."

SHE lifted her head. She blinked, and then, like a schoolgirl, knuckled the tears from the corners of her eyes. She gave Lewt an expression of everlasting gratitude—and something more affectionate.

"Please—no more Miss Farrell, Lewt," she said, taking his sore, aching hand between both of her own and gently rubbing it. "Call me Esther. You've every right to. When I saw you lying there, so close to death, I realized it was more to protect me than yourself. And when he fell with that knife, something in me died with you. But now that you're alive—" She broke off, flushed a little, then asked, "You will call me Esther, won't you?"

Lewt nodded, took her hands and brought her up on her feet with him. "Yes—Esther."

Giving the lifeless savage a glance, Lewt led her back to the horses. They moved away, but remained in the concealment of the woods for half an hour until Lewt was sure the dead savage's companions were not returning.

Then they crossed the stretch of clearing to the river bank. Lewt washed the blood from his shirt-front and vest, and his nail-cut wrist. With a towel taken from her suitcase, Esther washed and dried the branch scratches on his face and neck. Then, for another half-hour, they sprawled out on the grassy bank and simply rested.

"Lewt?"

"Yes, Esther?"

"Must you go through the Pass and sell your herd down in New Buffalo?"

The same thing had been going through his own mind. He realized the danger to the whole Fox River Valley if the Crows failed to get meat soon. But that was Major Sammott's problem. Lewt's father was in a grave, helpless situation, unless he got twenty thousand dollars quickly. There were no buyers here, only in New Buffalo, where there was always a ready market.

"Yes, I must," he told her. "I've told you about my father. And I've got to hurry about it, so let's be moving."

Esther frowned, then bit her lip. It was as if she had wanted to say something important, then changed her mind. Getting to her feet, she followed him to the horses, where they mounted and rode upstream to a shallow ford just below Coon Creek and the agency trail on the opposite bank.

"After what's happened, don't you think it would be better if you gave up this idea of painting among the tribes?" begged Lewt, once they had crossed the river and climbed the bank.

Looking straight ahead, Esther replied, "My employer is strict. He wants results, not excuses."

Lewt stared at her. There was a strangeness about her that puzzled him.

It was shortly before noon when Lewt and Esther arrived at the agency compound. While Lewt took her things from the pack-horse, her eyes moved restlessly, observing the sprawling cabin, barns, shed and enormous corrals that were empty.

Lewt took quick notice himself of the two saddled broncs under the shed of the barn. One was Gettel's. The other was Trace Devers'.

They found the three men eating at a table in a side room. A young Indian boy was just bringing in the coffee. Not trusting any Indian for long, Major Sammott had a new one from the reservation each week to serve him.

"Major Sammott," said Lewt, ushering Esther into the room, "this is Miss Farrell. She is an artist with a commission to paint the Crows. Her company has told her she would be able to work out from the agency, but I think it's risky."

Sammott's buffalolike frame came up out of his chair. His eyes were like needle points. He cared nothing for women. Pulling at his beard, he replied, "Your company takes too much for granted, Miss Farrell. This is no place for a white woman. And especially right now!"

Trace Devers' yellow hair shone like gold as he came to his feet. The big, gleaming silver buckle on his gun-belt scratched against the table. His eyes were on Esther, and there was an insulting hunger in them.

"I'd say you are wrong, Major," came his low, monotoned voice. "Right now is an especially right time to have a lovely woman join us. Sit down, Miss Farrell."

Esther glanced at Lewt, then took a chair at the table. "You need not worry about me, Major Sammott," she said. "I'll be all right here. I understand Indians."

VII

GETTEL, his fist-bruised face expressionless, drained his cup and moved away. He seemed a little uneasy, and his eyes rarely left Lewt Marshland. His rifle stood in a corner behind Lewt. Lighting a cigarette, he moved casually toward it.

Lewt kept his attention on the Major. "Major," he said, coming to the table and bracing his hands on it, "Devers has probably told you already why I'm here. I need signed papers of permission from you to cross the reservation. If you have them ready, I'll be leaving. My men are waiting for me at my ranch, and I'm in a hurry."

Sammott puckered his lips, looked disconcertedly at Esther, then straight at Lewt. "Can't give you that permission," he said. "It's not safe. You would only stir up the Crows. They're in a bad mood."

Lewt caught the glint of triumph in Trace Devers' eyes. "I don't need to be told that, Major," he retorted curtly. "Because of your careless treatment to these tribes, Miss Farrell and I had serious trouble getting here."

"We could have been killed!" Esther cut in suddenly, and before Lewt could stop her, she described the fight in the woods.

"There you are, Marshland!" exclaimed Sammott when she finished. "I'm not letting you run any cattle across. They'd wipe you out!"

"Never mind my safety!" snapped Lewt, bringing his fist down on the table. "Just sign a permit. Do I get it?"

"No!"

"Then I'll cross without it!"

Enraged, Lewt whirled around to head for the doorway. He took one step, then a rifle barrel was abruptly jammed against his ribs. At the other end was Joe Gettel.

"Go easy, Lewt," came Gettel's nervous voice.

Lewt stared into the man's eyes. Uncertainty mingled with strained determination lay within them. The face Lewt had battered and bruised was slightly pale.

"What is the meaning of all this?" It was Esther who spoke, and her excited eyes kept shifting back and forth from Gettel to the Major.

"Nothing for you to get excited about," declared Sammott abruptly. Reaching into his shirt pocket, he produced a bill of sale, spread it on the table before Lewt. "Instead of getting my signature, Marshland, I want yours. And your cattle."

A contemptuous grin spread on Lewt's face. So that was it! He should have guessed it.

Picking up the paper, he read it quickly. The price was low, much less

than he could get at New Buffalo. Knowing the usual Government rate of ten cents a pound, he quickly realized Sammott's purpose was to fatten his pockets at Government expense.

With a jeering laugh, he threw the paper in Sammott's face. "Go to the devil!" he cried. "I don't give my beefs away, Major!"

The muzzle of Gettel's rifle jabbed into his side deeper than ever, threateningly. Trace Devers lowered his hand to his pistol butt. And Lewt remembered again Devers was a cool killer!

"Sign it—or else!" came Sammott's barking command.

Devers began to move around the table toward Lewt. Sammott produced a pen and ink. Esther began to protest, but the agent shoved her aside with a cursed warning not to interfere again.

Beet-red with rage, Lewt stared at the pen thrust out at him in Sammott's fingers. He pictured his father, receiving his letter and waiting. Then he saw the cold mercilessness in Sammott's eyes, the pistol in Devers' hand. There could be no doubt that they would kill him unless he signed.

Tearing the pen from Sammott's fingers, he bent over and reluctantly scratched his name on the bill of sale. But even as he wrote, he heard Esther's scream. Then something blunt crunched down on the back of his head. Blinding pain smashed through him, and the pen fell from his fingers.

Lewt dropped to the floor, unconscious.

ESTHER stared down at Lewt's body unbelievingly, hands to her gaping mouth, in horror. Trace Devers, holstering the gun with which he had knocked Lewt down, watched her closely. His expression was charged with keen speculation and design.

"You murderous fiends!" cried Esther. She turned savagely on Sammott, but the Major flung her back into a chair.

"You'll get worse, if you're not careful!" he warned.

The Indian boy cook came running from the kitchen. Frightened by what he had seen, his only thought was escape and return to his father's tepee. Like a scampering fox, he darted through the agency's main room, out through the door and across the yard toward Coon Creek and the reservation beyond.

Drawing his service pistol, Major Sammott ran after him. Bracing his legs in the yard, he fired shot after shot at the zigzagging little brown savage.

There was a splash, and the boy was in the creek, swimming frantically for the other side. Bullets sheathed themselves in the water around him, then he was scrambling wetly up the opposite bank, threading through the brush toward the reservation and safety, with a story to tell.

Back inside, Devers pointed at Lewt's body and looked at Joe Gettel. "All right, Gettel. You know what you're to do. If you fail, you get no cut."

For an instant Joe Gettel hesitated. He blinked and pulled at his lip. Then, standing his rifle in the corner, he silently helped Devers carry Lewt out to his horse and rope him across the saddle.

After he led his own mount from the shed, Gettel came inside again, just after Sammott returned. On the log walls of the living room were lances, bows, arrows and knives, together with other arms and implements of the Crows, all in decorative arrangement. Taking a horn-bow and arrow, Sammott handed them to Gettel with a warning.

"Make sure it looks like the Crows got him for what he did to them yesterday and today. Now get to it. In the morning we'll show this bill of sale to Lewt's men and drift the herd down here."

Esther stared at them speechlessly. She hated her own physical weakness. Her inability to do anything. Her helplessness to stop this unthinkable thing

from taking place!

Only she must!

Climbing into his saddle, the bow over his shoulder, the arrow in his rifle boot, Gettel took the lead rein of Lewt's burdened horse and rode northwest. Splashing across the Fox River at the ford, he followed Lewt's and Esther's back trail toward the woods of elder where Lewt had killed the savage.

Drops of blood fell to the grass from Lewt's dangling head.

Three quarters of an hour later, Gettel found the butchered remains of Lewt's steer on the edge of the woods. Somewhere nearby would be the savage's lifeless body, reasoned Gettel. All he had to do was dispatch Lewt somewhere in the vicinity to make it appear the revengeful work of the Crows.

He glanced at the unconscious burden on the horse he led. A moment of uncertainty attacked Gettel. Then he clenched his fists and rode into the woods.

Selecting a suitable tree, he dismounted and untied Lewt. He worked quickly, feverishly, as if anxious to be done with what he must do.

Pulling Lewt's limp body from the back of the bay, he dragged it to the tree, braced it upright against the bole. With a rope, he secured it there by passing it under Lewt's armpits and around his chest.

Gettel blinked, trying to think swiftly, trying to overcome the rebellious resistance building up within himself. Lewt hung there before him like a rag doll, head slumped forward. Lewt's pistol was still in his holster. Yes, the arrow would go in at the right angle. After he cut him down, it would look natural, unstaged, when someone found Lewt latter.

GETTEL'S throat began to go dry when he took the bow and arrow from his saddle. He moved six paces away from where Lewt sagged unconsciously. Then Gettel turned to face his victim.

A tremor went through him. Twice he fumbled, as he tried to fit the arrow to the bow-string. Cursing at the thing within him that rebelled, he forced himself to think of the fat share he would get from the fifty or sixty thousand dollars Sammott would get from the Government for Lewt's herd.

At last he got the arrow fitted to the string. Tense, sweat beading on his brow, he squinted nervously. Then he sighted the spot near Lewt's shirt pocket, over the heart. The bow bent, the arrow came back with the pulled string—

"Joe! Stop! My God, what are you doing?"

Gettel snapped his head around. He hadn't heard the sound of hoofs on the grass, threading in through the woods. His tormented mind had been deaf to everything but the screaming demands of the act he had to commit.

"Leona!" he rasped, recognizing his black-haired wife on the pony breasting through the branches.

She flung herself to the ground, ran toward him. Her eyes were staring with horror and amazement.

"Joe!" she cried again, grabbing him by the arm, shaking him. "Have you gone mad?" She tried to pull the bow and arrow from his hands, but he shoved her away. "Joe! Is this you? My husband? Can you kill like this?"

It was her shouted words that reached Lewt's returning consciousness. At first he couldn't think where he was. He saw only the leafy ground, his own boot-toes. Then feeling the tug of the rope around his chest, he lifted his head, saw Gettel and Leona before him, the bow and arrow in Gettel's hands. Bewildered for an instant, he suddenly grasped the situation and what Gettel had been about to do.

"You don't understand, Leona!" he heard Gettel yell at his wife, as he struggled with her.

"But I do!" she protested. "You've been with that Devers man! I met Ed Emory on the way to Mr. Marshland's

with the wagon. He said he saw you at the agency with Devers. I was headed there, when I saw you coming into the woods." She turned, pointed at Lewt roped to the tree. "How could you think of it? That's Mr. Marshland, Joe! He saved Pop's life. And you were going to—"

"But Leona, Devers and the Major, they—" Gettel tried to bring up the bow and arrow again, but now he was trembling. He tried to meet his wife's accusing eyes, but he couldn't. "You see, Leona, I—I want that money. No! No, I can't, Leona! You're right! I—I can't do it!"

Gettel suddenly went limp. A sob broke from his dry lips. All at once he was helpless before a greater something in him which he could no longer conquer or overcome.

Leona swiftly put her arms around him, and Gettel's bruised face went down babylike into the black hair mantling her shoulder. He sniffled and sobbed and Leona patted his back comfortingly.

Lewt watched in silence for a moment. From the beginning he had judged Joe Gettel correctly. The tough, swaggering exterior had been nothing but a protective veneer for the deeper weaknesses within him.

The rope binding Lewt to the tree was only under his armpits. Discovering his pistol in his holster, he laid his palm on the butt of it.

"Leona!" he called.

She looked up, surprised, for she had thought him badly wounded and still unconscious.

"Mr. Marshland!" she cried. "You're all right?"

"Tell Joe to cut me loose," commanded Lewt.

Lewt heard her speak firmly to Gettel. Keeping his hand on his gun-butt, he saw Gettel drop the bow and arrow, then turn and face him. Their eyes locked. Then Gettel lowered his glance, quickly and guiltily. Pulling his sheathknife, Gettel walked hesitatingly toward Lewt still struggling with his conflict.

LEWT said nothing. But his eyes were on Gettel hawkishly, as the man came within striking distance of him. One wrong move—

Gettel could no longer meet Lewt's eyes. He was pale and shaken, saturated now with the full sense of the awful thing he had nearly committed. Reaching with the knife, he made two quick strokes, severed the rope around Lewt.

As the coils fell at Lewt's feet, Leona moved in close. "Mr. Marshland," she said, her eyes burning with shame, "I don't know what I should say to you. This is a terrible thing, my Joe doing what he did. You've every right to hate us. But please, Mr. Marshland, he's not all bad. He really isn't. I swear it. It's just that he thinks the whole world is against him. That everybody else has it better than him. He just wants so much without wanting to give anything for it."

Lewt looked down into her eyes. They were like an open book. And it was easy to read her selfless, unquestioning love for her husband, in spite of all that she knew him to be.

"Leona," he said, but staring angrily at Gettel, "I doubt if there is as much good in Joe as you think. I ought to take him down to Altawan to the deputy sheriff. But you're a good woman, Leona. A good wife. I don't want to hurt you. For your sake and Yancey's, I'll give Joe another chance. Now take him home—and keep him there!"

VIII

CLUTCHING Gettel by the shirt collar, Lewt held him close for an instant. His eyes burned hotly into Gettel's, menacing.

"You don't deserve a good woman like Leona," he said threateningly. "Make an ounce of trouble again, and I'll come for you, Gettel. And it won't be with just my fists!"

"I want no more trouble with you, Marshland," bleated Gettel. "I must have been crazy, I guess."

Suddenly Lewt realized the danger that Esther must be in back at the agency. She had been a witness to everything. Sammott and Devers might do anything to prevent her from revealing what she knew!

"Gettel!" cried Lewt, shaking the man. "What happened to Miss Farrell back there? What did they do to her after they knocked me out? Talk fast, man!"

"She's safe enough right now," explained Gettel. "They gave me orders to come back when I was finished here. They want me to hide her out until after the Government inspector comes and gives Sammott the check. They couldn't take a chance of having her around the agency long, since the inspector is expected most any day. But they'll be waiting for me to get back for a long time, because I ain't going. And so long as they keep counting on me to do their dirty work for them, they won't bother Miss Farrell."

Lewt breathed a little easier. It sounded reasonable. Devers and Sammott would wait for Gettel to take care of Esther. That meant she would be safe enough for a while. Certainly, at least, until he got back there in the morning.

"It better be as you say, Gettel," he warned. "Now get out of here."

Gettel turned away, wordlessly. Lewt watched him mount and wait for his wife. For a moment Leona's grateful eyes swept over Lewt's blood-streaked features. Then she touched his arm, anxiously.

"Thank you, Mr. Marshland," she said. "I promise to keep him good. But you're hurt. Your head. Can't I help you some way?"

Lewt touched his split scalp, where the blood had matted the hair. He shook his head.

"You've already done enough by stopping Joe," he told her, patting her hand. "Just keep him out of my way from now on. Good-bye, Leona. I've got to hurry . . . ."

It was almost sundown when Lewt reached his ranch. From a rise south of it, he could see it lying snug and isolated, with trees flanking three sides of it.

For three years it had been a refuge, a place of healing for the wounds of Illinois, a source of education. Smoke curled from the chimney. And as he rode down the slope, he saw the wagon from Hollister Wells, shaft down, in the yard. Ed Emory and the boys were there, as promised.

As he rode in, Steve White and Ed Emory came out of the ranchhouse.

"Where's Pete?" asked Lewt at once, fearing he was short-handed.

"Up the valley a piece," explained Steve White. "We got the herd bunched pretty fair today, and Pete's sticking with it tonight. We figure on pulling in the strays tomorrow."

"Won't have time for that now!" replied Lewt, hurriedly pulling off his saddle. "Get some grub into yourselves quick! We're shoving the herd across the reservation tonight! And we're pushing it fast!"

"Tonight?" questioned Ed Emory, pulling his pipe from his mouth, his buckskins pink in the bright sunset.

"Yes!" snapped Lewt. "I've got to get back to the agency by dawn sure!" Hastily he detailed all that had happened since he had seen them last. "Sammott's got that bill of sale now," he continued. "That means he'll be around here some time tomorrow with men to take the herd down to his corrals. Well, we're going to be through Silver Rock Pass by then. By dawn, in fact, because I'm swinging over from there to the agency to get Miss Farrell out of there before I settle with Sammott!"

ED EMORY'S quiet eyes smoldered strangely. They always did when Sammott's name was mentioned. He followed Lewt and Steve White inside the ranchhouse, where the smell of stew told Lewt that Emory had been busy. Steve helped Lewt with the ugly wound on his head. Then they sat down at a rough table near the fireplace.

"We'll have to be damn lucky to keep the Crows from finding out we're passing through," remarked Emory, as he filled their tin plates from the stew-pot. "If they do, it'll be hotter than hell between here and the Pass."

"Got to take the risk," Lewt replied. "Beside, the Crows are like the rest of the plains tribes. Their beliefs won't let them attack at night. By dawn we'll be through the Pass and off their reservation. They'll do nothing after that. But dawn it's got to be, so dig into that grub and get it down!"

Steve White sucked in a deep breath. "We'll sure have to push some, Boss, to do it."

Lewt's eyes glowed with feverish determination. "We'll make it!"

By midnight they had reached the shallow narrows of the Fox River with the herd. On the opposite bank lay the reservation. Nearly thirty miles of it stretched between the river and Silver Rock Pass.

Lewt rode point, his mind divided between pressing the herd on, and concern over Esther. He was fairly sure she'd be safe until dawn, since Devers and Sammott were counting on Joe Gettel to remove her from the agency. The Pass was near the agency, and he was getting there just as quickly as he could.

Impatient, Lewt was the first to splash across the moonlit stream. Steve White and Pete worked the wings. Ropes whirling, calling softly, they rode back and forth, pressing the herd into a column that threshed its way across the river onto Indian land.

Ed Emory brought up the drag with the camp wagon and rope-led remuda. In the bright moonlight, the wagon's hooped canvas top was like rolled white icing. Pipe in jaw, rifle against his knee, the lanky hunter kept his keen eyes moving right and left for signs of what he feared most—discovery, and a gradual massing of the Crows.

All the men worked with a sense of urgency. Important as it was to get the herd safely across the Indian land, still more important was the need of their boss to get to the agency as soon as possible.

Lewt rode with animal-like watchfulness. He had a fresh horse under him, and frequently he was a mile ahead of the point. Topping rises, he did his best to pick out signs of tepee villages in the distance in order to avoid them.

During the first hour he saw none. Like a long, broad caterpillar, the herd hurriedly wormed its way across the forbidden lands toward the distant Blue Powders and the Pass. Not once did Lewt let it settle down to a walk.

Three times during the next two hours Lewt spotted winking fires and tent villages. Shifting direction, he skirted them widely, hurriedly.

Only once did they halt. It was after the third hour, when they were more than half-way across the reservation. The stream divided a hollow, and Lewt let the cattle quench their thirst. Otherwise they would have had trouble, forcing them to keep up the swift pace they had held so far.

"I don't like it, Lewt," worried Ed Emory, as he led the four extra horses that served as their scant remuda, to water.

Lewt was beside him, building a cigarette. Moonlight gleamed from his belted cartridges. His ears were cocked, but he heard nothing other than the chattering protests of disturbed night birds, insects, and the distant wail of a wolf.

"What do you mean, Emory?"

The tall hunter retied the remuda ropes to the tail-gate of the camp wagon. Working his fingers uneasily around the collar of his buckskin shirt, he replied, "It just ain't natural, Lewt. Too quiet. I've seen a couple of shadows in the last hour that just weren't trees, brush, or antelopes. They moved like men."

LEWT nodded. He had seen the same thing several times himself, shadows that had darted along the flanks of their course. Only he had kept it to him-

self, fearing to alarm the others.

"The Crows know, then," he admitted.

"They sure do," said Emory, tamping tobacco into his strong pipe. "And you can bet your last shirt button the word's being spread around damn fast to the rest of the meat-hungry devils. Don't like it, Lewt."

Lewt rubbed his jaw. "I don't either. But we're moving on, just the same. It's through the Pass tonight, or never."

The moonlight flight went on. More alert now than ever, Steve White and Pete shuttled along the flanks of the precious Oregon shorthorns. The rataplan of hundreds of hoofs beating across the broad basin floor rose like strange, eerie thunder on a night so clear.

Another hour passed. The tension in Lewt mounted to new heights. For the moon was settling deeply in the west. It was the last half-hour before the first gray streaks of dawn, and now the great tree-shod slopes of the Blue Powders were looming up in front of them. Would they get through Silver Rock Pass safely?

The great, U-shaped cut through the mountains was just ahead, dark, ominous. In fifteen minutes the vanguard of the herd would be drumming its hoofs at the foot of the gentle slope that formed the beginning of its mouth. And in an hour, Lewt reasoned, they ought to have the last of the herd through it.

"This is it!"

It was Steve White, chortling with happy relief, as he beat a stray back into the bawling column. Lewt drove near him, on the way back to the camp wagon.

"Keep 'em tight, Steve!" he called. "We're not through it yet!"

The jolting camp wagon was ghostly with with dust. Ed Emory kept spitting and cursing, reins in one hand, the other on his rifle laying across his knees.

"See anything?" cried Lewt above the roar of hoofs and wagon wheels.

"Nope!" shouted Emory. "That's what has got me worried so damn much! Them feathered sons are somewhere, you can bet on it!"

Lewt absorbed Emory's fears silently. Whirling his horse, he spurred it along the left wing, past Pete. Pete's dusty red mustache was like a wad of white cotton under his nose.

"Keep your eyes open, Pete!" yelled Lewt, flashing by. "Hustle them up!"

They were nearly into the Pass now. The moon was down and the first streaks of dawn were graying the U-shaped patch of sky outlining the Pass.

Lewt spurred on up to the lumbering point. The shorthorns were blowing hard behind him, straining up the grade to enter the mountain-walled passageway. Soon, now. Soon they'd belch out free of the valley into safety.

It grew lighter. Dimly, Lewt could distinguish the outlines of talus rocks on either side, the grassy mounds, brush, and a larger mass of something strange that seemed to move.

Suddenly all hell broke loose!

There was a loud, concerted bloodcurdling yell. It boomed back and forth from the walls of the Pass from hundreds of throats of meat-crazed redskins. Like ants pouring from their mounds, shadowy ponies and feathered riders sprang up from all sides and directly ahead. The Pass was choked, completely clogged with Crow Indians!

Lances flashed in the brightening daylight. Beaded saddle-blankets and bullhide shields glinted. Skull-crackers were poised in up-raised, buckskin-clad arms holding arrow-loaded horn bows high.

Lewt yanked his horse back on its hind legs. They were trapped! Blocked! The herd would never get through the Pass now, or ever!

Appalling dismay tore icily through Lewt. He had failed! Lost everything! There could never be any recovery of the herd. Perhaps, they couldn't even save their lives!

WHIRLING, he pulled his pistol and raced back. The vanguard of his herd was straining toward him, the first yellow rays of sunrise bathing their faces.

A shower of arrows hissed past him. There came sharp, bawling cries of pain as the lead steers, suddenly feather-tufted, plunged to their knees, went down. The others stumbled over them, hesitated, went down in death as the Crows, rushing forward on their ponies and yelling wildly, drove arrows and lances into them to prevent their rush into the Pass and out of the valley.

Lewt raced crazily. As he skirted the edge of the disorganized herd, he kept firing his six-gun over the rump of his lunging animal. Steve White saw him coming. Pulling his own gun, White whirled his mount around to keep pace with Lewt's.

"Break through the herd to Pete!" yelled Lewt. "Race for the agency on Coon Creek. I'll get Emory!"

IX

ONLY the uncertain light of sunup saved them. That, and the fact the Crows possessed no firearms—only lances and arrows. And it was this that determined Lewt to use the protection of the agency's log-walls as a fort, knowing their guns could keep many numbers of them at bay until the Crows either quieted down or the trail drivers somehow got help.

Racing down the slope, the cattle scattering right and left, Lewt spied the camp wagon. It was halted. With the first roar of the mighty barbaric yell booming out of the Pass ahead, Ed Emory had gathered up his rifle and cut a horse loose from the tail-gate. In a minute he had a bridle on it, but no saddle. Indianlike, he forked it bareback.

At this moment Lewt plunged up.

"It's no use!" cried Lewt. "Can't stop them! They got what they want—the herd! C'mon! We got to make it to the agency! There's a white woman there!"

"What about Sammott and Devers being there?"

"What do you think?"

Steve White and Pete caught up with them. With the early sun on their backs, spurs raking their mounts, they wildly pounded down the foothills toward Coon Creek and the agency on the south bank. Behind them, feathers straight back and bows bent, came fifty or more bucks intent on driving them off or making a mass killing. The others remained to round up the scattering herd, divide it, and drive the meat back to their villages.

Lewt raced with direful hell in his heart. His father would now wait in vain. He would be ruined. Maybe worse! And at the bottom of it all was Major Sammott and his bitter, unscrupulous dereliction of duty as agent for the tribes.

The Crows' ponies were fast. Over his shoulder, Lewt could see them gaining. But the banks of Coon Creek were close now. Once across, once off the reservation, they could reach the shelter of the log agency buildings in no time.

Suddenly Pete screamed.

He was on Lewt's right, a yard behind. A two-foot arrow was protruding from his back. Blood suddenly gushed from his mouth, and Pete pitched forward against the neck of his pounding horse, slipped from his saddle and fell.

Lewt's lips became a thin, white slit of vengeful intent. Major Sammott and Trace Devers. No redskin had just killed Pete. Pete with the red mustache and jolly laugh. No, it was hunger and rage at bad treatment. Hunger and rage, the deadly fruit of Sammot and Devers' greedy plotting!

They hit the waters of Coon creek, their ponies' fore-feet spraying water clear to the opposite bank. Plunging on, they beat their way along the stream until they came in sight of the square log building and barn.

Keeping to the reservation side of the boundary creek, the Crows raced along parallel to them, discharging their arrows and yelling wildly. Leveling his rifle, Emory fired. A pony was suddenly riderless. Steve White emptied his pistol, but the conditions were poor for short-arm accuracy.

"That was for Pete!" yelled Emory.

And then they were thundering past the empty corrals, lunging up to a dirt-churning halt under the sheds at the back of the agency cabin.

Hitting the ground running, Lewt glued his eyes on the back door. Pistol waist high and cocked, he ran for it, Emory and Steve close behind. He prayed that Esther would keep in the clear, somehow sheltered from gun-range.

It puzzled Lewt. Certainly Devers and Sammott had seen them. But why weren't they throwing lead at him? They must have counted on him being dead. But surely seeing him alive ought to cause them to try to finish what Gettel's weakness had failed to do.

But Lewt had no time to puzzle it further. Raising his boot, he slammed his heel against the back door. It slammed inward against the inside wall.

LEAPING in, Lewt ran through the kitchen. No sign of Esther. Anyone!

Eyes darting right and left, he sprang through the sideroom, then into the main, front trading room that faced the creek.

"Sammott!" he cried, leaping sideward, about to trigger.

But Lewt didn't fire. He just stared, not believing what he saw.

He felt Emory and Steve rush past him. Heard Steve fire a shot through the open front door across the creek, then slam it shut and bolt it. There came the tinkling crash of Emory smashing out the window glass, poking his gun-barrel out and firing at the savages scattering behind the brush on the opposite bank of the creek.

Lewt moved slowly toward the figure of Sammott. The buffalo-built Major was slumped in his big chair. He was battered and bruised, his black beard blood-stained.

An almost empty brandy bottle was in Sammott's fist, where it hung over the arm of his chair. He was mumbling incoherently. He appeared oblivious to everything that was going on around him, his eyes glazed and staring at something at the end of the trading counter.

Lewt moved a little and saw it. It was the big iron safe, its door swung open, the contents of official papers and documents scattered all over the floor around it.

"Check—Farrell—investigator. Devers, the dog—Vancouver—"

Sammott's sing-song voice was almost inaudible above the roar of Steve's and Emory's guns. Arrows were pricking the outside walls now, and the morning was filled with the wild yelling of the besieging Crow bucks seventy yards away.

"Where is she?—where is Miss Farrell?" demanded Lewt, uncertain whether Sammott was drunk or deranged. "What became of her and Trace Devers?"

Sammott's head rocked from side to side. His words came like the delirious chanting of someone demented:

"The safe—the long years—Vancouver—South America—damn the Government!" He let out a shriek of rage, trembled, gulped at the bottle, let his arm sink down limply once again. "He's got the check—Farrell—investigating me—Marshland's herd—Vancouver—China—South America. Damn Indians—once a Colonel—a whole regiment to command—!"

Lewt reached down, grabbed him by the shoulders, shook him fiercely.

"Where is she?"

Sammott stared up at him almost blankly, with only faint recognition. Either his reason was nearly gone, or he was hopelessly drunk. But Lewt could get nothing coherent enough out of him to understand what had happened since he had been pistol-butted here the day before.

There was plenty of evidence of a fierce struggle. Chairs were broken, overturned. Splintered brandy glasses were everywhere. Yet not a single weapon of Sammott's was around. And beside the cabinet where he had placed Esther's suitcase there was—

Lewt went cold all over. The suitcase had been broken open, Esther's things scattered everywhere. And then he saw the torn piece of her fringed riding jacket, and caught on a splinter of the trading counter was the bright yellow ribbon that had bound her beautiful hair!

Like a madman himself, Lewt whirled on Sammott again. This time he yanked the agent clear out of his chair, slammed him hard against the wall.

"What happened here?" Lewt was almost screaming now. "What did you do to her?"

Ed Emory paused from firing, watched them. His eyes were charged with venomous hatred when they turned toward the Major.

Lewt back-handed Sammott twice. The shocks seemed momentarily to unite Sammott's splitting mind. He coughed, stared wildly around the room, raised his brandy bottle, as if to point.

"She—the check—wouldn't sign—" He broke off, gulped, then went on, "Devers—double-crossed—tied her—forced her—Vancouver—South America—"

AN ARROW hissed through the window, twanged into the back wall. Steve's roaring Colt jarred the room. Acrid gunsmoke rolled lazily ceilingward, stung the nostrils, burned the eyes.

Lewt knew he must act quickly. The best he could get from Sammott's broken-up explanation was that Trace Devers had Esther with him for some reason concerning the signing of a check, and that he was probably headed for Vancouver and a boat to South America or China.

"Hold your fire!" Lewt cried suddenly.

Steve White pulled back his hot pistol from the window sill. He stared at Lewt perplexedly. Ed Emory paused to cock and jack another shell into his rifle, his hollow-set eyes gleaming with vindictive speculation while he watched the Major, catlike. Then he spoke again.

"Are you crazy enough to think you can make peace with 'em?" he asked, slouching down below the sill, back to the wall.

"I have to try something," replied Lewt. "Seems Devers is forcing Miss Farrell with him to Vancouver. Lord knows what that yellow-haired killer will do! I've got to get out of here and head him off!"

"Move twenty feet outside, and they'll make you look like a porcupine!" said Steve White, shoving fresh cartridges into his Colt.

"They got their meat now!" Lewt cried impatiently. "Plenty of it! What more could they want?"

Ed Emory looked at Major Sammott, then ran his finger down the barrel of his rifle. "I don't know," he lied. "Why don't you ask them?"

"Don't know the dialect. Do you?"

The hunter shook his head. Then he pointed at Sammott. "He does."

Lewt's eyes locked with Emory's. He hadn't forgotten about the mysterious rifleman around the agency at nights. Or the story Emory's sick brother on picket line, where he had been killed because of an officer's cruel unreasonableness.

Lewt turned to the decorated walls from which the day before Sammott had taken a Crow bow and arrow and handed it to Gettel. Grabbing a long-bladed lance, he picked up a piece of white trade-cloth from behind the counter, pierced it with the lance, fashioning a white flag of truce.

"Wave it out the window, Steve!" he commanded, handing it to the powder-smeared rider. "And keep it moving. I'm going to open the door!"

Major Sammott was bent limply over his gutted safe. Lewt grabbed him, shook him until traces of understanding again showed in his alcoholized eyes.

"You savvy their dialect, Sammott!" Lewt roared at him. "You're going out there and talk to them! Understand me, Sammott? You aren't worth a pig's

tail, but you're going out there and tell them to go home. You're going to tell them they got their meat. Plenty of it! You're going to ask them what more do they want. That if they don't pull out at once, all the troopers from up in Fort Killman will come and destroy all their tepees and families till they are dust!"

At first Sammott shook his head, turning to stare at his open safe again. Lewt grabbed him by the beard, jerked his face around, crying, "You're going out there, Sammott! You're responsible for all this! You're going to find out what else they want!"

Emory breathed heavily, lips tight, as Lewt hurried Sammott to the door. Unbolting it, Lewt opened it and shoved the Major outside and started him alone toward the creek, thirty yards away.

Lewt remained in the doorway, exposed. He couldn't ask any man, not even Sammott, to risk doing what he wouldn't do himself. But he kept his pistol holstered, as another symbol of truce, together with the flag.

With stumbling steps, Sammott moved toward the creek. The morning sun flashed brightly on the brandy bottle he still carried in his fist. The breeze stirred through his black beard, touseled his hair, rippled his torn shirt.

INSIDE, Ed Emory watched every step of the man. His lips stirred, and Steve White, a yard away, heard Emory whisper:

"It was like that for my brother Tom. Night after night. Sick from battle, soldier's heart. But he kept him on the picket line. Kept him there when he should have relieved him. Kept him there when the poor kid was sick enough in his head to be helpless. Hour after hour. The enemy's bullets tormented him constantly. And then they got him. I swore some day I'd work it out even. Swore that some day I'd see that merciless skunk of an officer get the same. I changed my name and now—now I'm seeing it!" Emory paused, eyes staring expectantly across the clearing.

Sammott had halted on the bank of the creek. His voice came back faintly across the clearing. He was speaking brokenly, as he had in the cabin, but in the dialect known to the Crows.

Lewt heard the words, but didn't understand them. Other than the faint, distant voice, the whole earth suddenly seemed hushed for these few moments. But it was a silence pregnant with death.

At last Sammott spoke no more. For another moment he stood there, facing the creek, bottle in hand, as if waiting for his reply.

It came—suddenly.

Shattering the silence, came the twang of dozens of bow-strings. A shower of arrows hissed through the air from all directions, all converging on one point.

Sammott screamed, took a stumbling step. The bottle fell from his splayed-out fingers. Pitching forward, he fell, his face splashing into the muddy edge of the creek.

His body was like a pin-cushion full of arrows.

Lewt cursed, pulled his guns and leaped back inside. Slamming the door, he ran to the window. Steve White dropped the flag of truce, brought his pistol to the sill. Ed Emory merely nodded, as if in consent to what he had seen, then casually raised his rifle.

But they fired on shots.

For suddenly they beheld something they had never expected. On the far bank of the creek, movement began begin the tall brush and trees. But no more arrows were driven at the cabin. Instead, they could see the Crows mounting their ponies and riding away, back toward their tepees, their hungry families—and plenty of Marshland meat.

Ed Emory laid down his rifle and pulled out his pipe. "Sammott," he said with grave satisfaction, "was all that they wanted besides something to eat. Not us."

Lewt stared blankly at the departing

tribesmen. Yes, they had what they wanted now. Even Sammott. And now all white men in the vast basin of the Fox River would be safe, but—

But he was wiped out. Broke! And a father he loved, who so desperately needed his help, would wait futilely down in Cheyenne for the twenty thousand dollars that he had promised to bring him!

Lewt turned abjectly from the window. Despair gripped him, and then again he saw the bright yellow ribbon caught on the splinter, the torn piece of fringed jacket. Esther's!

And Trace Devers, a killer, had her!

Jamming his pistol in his holster, he whirled on Emory and Steve White. "Take Sammott's body to Hollister Wells!" he commanded. "I've got a trail to follow that heads for Vancouver!"

X

WITH his heart in his throat, Lewt rode fiercely. He knew of only one trail northwest out of the valley that could possibly take anyone in the direction of the Border and Vancouver. It was a narrow old goat trail, winding and twisting high over the Rockies, north of the Six Peaks range to the west. Hunters had told him about it, and a rider could make it if he walked his horse over it.

He had no knowledge of how many hours' lead Devers had on him. But that didn't matter. He knew he would find him, would cut him off, eventually, even if it took him as far as Vancouver to do it.

For hours Lewt beat his way up the long, wild valley, northwest from the agency. Soon he realized that he would need a fresh horse and a grub sack in order to continue his pursuit. It might take days. And since his ranch lay along the line of his pursuit, he decided to pause there long enough to pick up some cold food and a fresh horse.

It was almost high noon when he came within sight of his ranch. He had topped a rise, and there it was below, snugly isolated, the healing refuge he had built three years before.

Suddenly he check-reined his weary mount to a halt. His eyes narrowed intently on the mouth of the stone chimney above the roof. At first he thought perhaps it was only an illusion. Blinking, he focused his eyes more keenly than before.

It was true! Smoke was spiraling from the chimney. Someone was occupying his cabin!

Possibilities rushed wildly into Lewt's brain. Could Trace Devers, believing him dead and the cabin deserted, have halted there with Esther?

Lewt loosened his gun and rode quickly down the slope. . . .

Inside the cabin, Esther Farrell lay on the blanketed bunk built against the wall. She was on her side, her wrists tied behind her, but her legs free. Her loosened hair was still disheveled from the nightmarish struggle she had endured down at the agency the night before. Her eyes were bloodshot from lack of sleep and fear of the man in the room with her.

"If you'd only get sense, woman!" growled Devers. He had been saying this for hours. "Just endorse that Government check to me, and I'll make it easier for you. Believe me."

Devers was bent over the fireplace at the back end of the little room. Two pots hung suspended from hooks over the hot coals, and he was busy stirring the contents with one of Lewt's long spoons. His long yellow hair gleamed like brass, and his muscular features bore deep scratches from fighting Esther's fingernails.

Esther watched him helplessly. Fearfully and hatefully. She would never forget the brutal way he had used his compact strength to overpower Sammott.

"You couldn't make anything easier for me," she replied, straining for the hundredth time against the rope around her wrists. "I'm still alive only because

you need my signature to negotiate fifty-five thousand dollars. You would kill me the moment after you got it!"

Trace Devers walked across the room toward the bunk. Compact as a bulldog, he formed a patronizing smile, bent down over her helplessness.

"I don't kill pretty things like you," he said, stroking her hair. "I want you. With that money, we can do big things in South America. Together. Just you and me."

"Take your hands off me, you— you killer!"

She wrenched her head away from his fingers, kicked at him with her free, booted feet. Devers moved away, grinning, returned to the meal he was readying for them before taking up the trail again.

Esther lay back again, panting. She knew no way out of this.

Her eyes turned toward the rumpled blankets at the end of the bunk. Devers had told her it was Lewt's place. They were *his* blankets— and her memory brought back the few moments she had been in his arms, of the wonderful, new thing that had been born in her in those breathless moments when she had thought he was going to be killed.

She looked at the chair beside the crude table. She pictured Lewt sitting in it. Pictured him using the many books stacked in the rough cabinet along the wall. Pictured him and herself filling the whole place with laughter and love and—

"What was that!"

IT WAS Devers who spoke suddenly. Startlingly. He stood rigid as stone, a steaming pot in one hand. Ears cocked, attention seaming his features, his eyes darted anxiously toward the window.

"Someone's out there!" he cried.

Devers flung the pot from his hand to grab his gun. The pot banged against the side of the fireplace, its contents splashing onto the floor. Flattening himself against the wall beside the closed door, he waited, his pistol poised.

Drawing back into the far corner of the bunk, Esther's eyes became glazed with horrified expectancy.

Lewt had dismounted in the trees, sixty feet from the windowless side of his cabin. Unstrapping his spurs, he pulled his Colt .45, then moved catlike and swiftly. Reaching the blank log wall, he quietly edged along it until he could see the horse shed around the corner. Two saddleless animals were tethered there, and they were close enough in order to recognize the "U.S." brand on one. The other was Esther's familiar calico.

Lewt was sure now. Devers was inside. But so was Esther, and that made it bad.

Circling the back of the cabin with its chimney wall, Lewt started along the window side. Stooping low to move under it, he suddenly halted as a startling metallic bang came from inside. It sounded familiarly like one of his own cook pots being thrown down. In that instant, Lewt knew that he had either been heard or seen approaching, and Devers had freed his hand to use his gun. Devers would be waiting.

Sweat moistened Lewt's palms. Gripping his gun tightly, he moved quickly around the cabin to the door. For a tingling moment he waited, every muscle tense. The door was closed, and beyond it waited death. But beyond it, too, was a woman who had come to mean much to him.

Indecision gripped Lewt for a moment longer. Then hitting the latch with one hand, he kicked out violently.

The door slammed inward. Plunging in, his eyes stabbed frantically for sight of Devers. Lewt traveled ten feet in that rush. Then he whirled, caught the smear of flame belching from Devers' roaring six-gun behind him.

Death tugged at the slack of Lewt's shirt at the waist. Dropping to his knees, he fired quickly. Drove his bullets at the ribbon of flame spiking from Devers' gun as the killer triggered the

second time. And then he saw Devers slowly reel away from the wall beside the door, his large, silvered belt buckle glinting.

Lewt never fired again.

There was the thud of Devers' gun on the floor, and Devers wavered. There came a grunted curse, the jingle of his chain-strapped spurs. The next instant, Devers pitched against the table. As it went over, his falling, outstretched arms hooked into the crude, book-lined cabinet against the wall, and he fell crashing to the floor, pulling it down with him.

For a hushed moment the only sound was the slipping of books on the mound of them over Trace Devers.

"Esther! Esther! Where are you?"

Lewt was up on his feet, and sheathing his gun. He didn't know in which direction to turn to find her.

Then from the corner where his bunk was came a choking voice filled with unbelief: "Lewt! Lewt, can it really be you?"

Lewt rushed to the bunk and picked her up in his arms. He glanced backward at Devers. The sight was not meant for a woman. Hurrying across the room to the door, he quickly carried Esther outside into the brightness of the sunlight and the cleanliness of the pure air.

"My wrists—they're tied," she half sobbed, her glistening eyes feasting on his face when Lewt finally halted at the spring.

Lewt stood her on her feet, then quickly cut her loose. For a moment they just stared at each other, yearningly.

Then he saw she was trying to raise her benumbed arms.

Lifting them for her, he quickly put them around his neck, then caught her trembling body in his own arms and kissed her.

"Esther," he breathed tenderly, his face buried in her hair. "Esther, what did they do to you?"

SINKING down on the grass beside the spring, Esther reached up and pulled Lewt down beside her.

"I thought you were dead," she said, rubbing her fingers affectionately on the back of his hand. "After Gettel took you away, and I thought I'd never see you again, I took an Indian skull-cracker from the wall and attacked Major Sammott. But Devers was there, and I had no chance. So I tried to threaten them by telling them who I really am."

"What do you mean?" puzzled Lewt. "I thought you were an artist, sent out here to paint the Crows. Aren't you?"

Esther smiled and shook her head. "No, Lewt. I was not sent out by any publishers. It's true, I can paint. But the Government had more important work for me to do than that."

"The Government?"

[Turn page]

"Yes," she replied. "The Bureau of Indian Affairs. My childhood out here and knowledge of the tribes made me valuable to them. For some time they've been concerned about Major Sammott's handling of the agency. They needed someone they could trust to investigate conditions and report. When the Major requisitioned Washington for an allotment check for over seven hundred head of cattle to supply the reservation, I begged for the assignment of bringing it out here and investigating conditions before finally endorsing it over to the Major."

LEWT just stared at her. He could hardly believe it. And then he remembered how she had looked when he had mentioned the Major earlier, her sympathy with the Indians, and her wish to do something for them.

"You're wonderful!"

She smiled. "When Major Sammott found out that I was the investigator he had been worrying about, he nearly went crazy," Esther went on. "Then he demanded the check. When I refused, he tied me, tore my suitcase apart, finally finding it in the secret compartment with the other necessary papers. For hours he fought with me, trying to make me endorse it over to him. Oh, Lewt, it was terrible!"

"But what about Trace Devers?"

Esther gathered her breath. "From the beginning I feared him more than I did Sammott," she explained. "A woman can recognize Devers' type quickly: And Devers believed he could succeed. It was a horrible, brutal fight at the agency. After finally beating the Major insensible, Devers got the combination and keys to the safe. In it were thousands of dollars for supplies that Sammott never purchased for the reservation. Taking the check, Devers threw all Sammott's guns into the creek and chased off his horses to prevent pursuit. I don't know what would have happened to me if you hadn't come here." She paused, frowned with perplexity. "Lewt, are you really here? I still can't believe that you're really alive."

"You can believe it," replied Lewt, squeezing her hand fondly. Then he told her about Leona, the loss of his herd, the death of Sammott, and about his father down in Cheyenne facing ruin because of his failure.

Esther smiled and lifted Lewt's sagging chin.

"But you didn't fail, Lewt," she told him. "The Crows have the meat they needed so badly. There won't be any outbreaks or mass killings now. And all this because of you."

"That may seem great," said Lewt, gravely, "But I still don't have twenty thousand dollars to save my father. Anything can happen."

Esther grinned at his worried features. "It has already happened," she told him, rising. "And it's good. You've supplied the Government, Lewt. And I've the authority to pay you the full Government price for every head of your cattle that is on the Crow reservation."

Lewt came to his feet quickly, caught her elbows in his hands, grasped her tightly. "You mean that check Devers took?" he asked. "Do you really mean I can get full Government price for my—"

SHE sealed his parted lips with her own, silencing him. His arms went around her, and for a few moments the only sound was the gurgling of the little spring nearby.

"Esther," said Lewt later, their heads close together as they stared down the wildly majestic valley glowing in the noonday sunlight, "Esther, we'll go to Cheyenne together. I want the grandest father in the world to meet the loveliest lady in it."

She nodded. "Just so you bring me back again to your valley and your books," she whispered. "I want to stay here forever—with you." • • •

STRANGERS in TOPOK

A Novel by JAMES W. ROUTH

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I

A TALL MAN in a yellow slicker, high-heeled boots and wide-brimmed hat swung from the step of the day coach next to the baggage car as the Westbound Limited creaked protestingly to a stop. The time was six minutes

It was a rainy night, and she was just another girl to the tall cowboy in a yellow slicker—till he found they were both marked for death

past midnight, which meant that the train was nearly four hours late. It wasn't raining at the moment, but the sky was densely overcast, the black air was heavy with moisture and a gusty wind swept across the wet planks of the landing platform. The scene was desolate and seemed deserted. Topok, a small Arizona town, wasn't a regular stop for this crack train and at that late hour even the depot was dark.

Striding briskly, carrying a shabby suitcase, Keith Denning was halfway along the side of the second sleeping car when he noticed that a porter had lifted several pieces of luggage out of the vestibule and that another passenger was getting off. This proved to be a woman, who stepped down lightly, dropped a tip into the porter's hand, and glanced around as if expecting someone to welcome her.

Unconsciously, Denning slowed his stride. The porter slammed the vestibule door shut. The train began to move. The woman turned and stooped to pick up a piece of her luggage. As she did, a dark form plunged out of the darkness behind her, and the next instant she was diving headlong across her luggage, over the edge of the platform, beneath the moving train.

Denning yelled, dropped his suitcase and sprang forward. His grabbing hand closed on a slender ankle. His boot heels clogged into a crack between two planks and he hauled back with all his strength, snaking the woman's writhing body up over the edge of the wet platform an instant before the wheels caught her. A violent yank landed her face-down across one of her own traveling bags.

The train rolled on, gathering speed, drowning out the sound of running feet. Denning flung a searching glance over his shoulder, but the rain-soaked darkness disclosed no sign of the woman's assailant. Shapely legs and a patch of something white met his downward glance. He lifted the woman to her feet. "There you are, ma'am! That was close!"

HIS HANDS gripped her shoulders, steadying her. She wasn't heavy, but her flesh was firm and there was strength in her slenderness. Her head, hatless now, reached slightly above his shoulder. The texture of her clothing and the scent of expensive perfume told him more than the darkness permitted him to see.

"I'll say it was!" she sputtered, shaking down her skirt. "You darn near killed me, you clumsy ox!"

"I darned near killed you! Say—" He checked himself, realizing that under the circumstances her mistake was natural enough. "You give me too much credit," he concluded drily.

She was standing clear of him now, but he sensed the tension that stiffened her slender body, saw the quick movement of her head, and wished he could see her face.

"You mean, it wasn't you who bumped into me?"

He considered swiftly. The picture in his mind was clear. Undoubtedly a deliberate attempt had been made to kill her. If he'd been the victim, he'd want to know about it.

"I mean nobody bumped into you," he said.

"But I certainly felt—Oh! You mean—"

The wail of the departing train filled in a moment of silence. A gust of wind brought a spatter of rain.

"I see," she said unsteadily. "Thank you." She held out her hand, looking up at him, her face a white blur in the darkness. "Words are such poor things! But I do thank you—for saving my life—for telling me."

Her grip was warm and strong for all that her hand was so small. He held it briefly, his awareness of her a disturbing thing, his curiosity keen. But the rain was coming down again.

"Can I help you to where you're going?" he asked.

She glanced around at the empty darkness, and he saw her shoulders move. "I thought someone would be

here to meet me. Is there a hotel in this town?"

It seemed an odd question. "Should be," he said drily. "I'll help you hunt for it."

Her face turned toward him quickly, but she didn't say anything. She did, however, insist upon carrying two of her three pieces of luggage, leaving him a large grip and his own suitcase. As soon as they rounded the end of the depot they saw two dim light blurs in the darkness, almost directly opposite each other, about a city block distant. The one of the far side of the wide, muddy street guided them into the lobby of the Topok Hotel.

It was raining hard when they tramped in, and the girl was breathless from hurrying. A pouchy oldster with tobacco-stained whiskers and an almost bald head blinked bleary eyes at them from behind the desk.

"Wondered why the Limited stopped," he wheezed. "Don't generally. Welcome to Topok, folks. Finest little town in Arizony. You want twin beds or the bridal soot?"

Cackling, he slapped his hand down upon the register that lay open on the desk. Denning felt his ears burn, and the girl flushed hotly, but her swift glance told him that she was not lacking a sense of humor. It also told him that she was an extraordinarily pretty girl. The light of an unshaded electric bulb glistened on dark red hair that was something special.

"You've got your rope tangled, Pop," he drawled. "The lady and I aren't traveling together. I don't even know her name. She tripped over a plank on the depot platform," he added, noting the shrewdness with which the old man was eyeing the girl's wet and rumpled clothing and generally disheveled appearance. "No lights down there and nobody to lend a hand with her baggage. This metropolis of yours isn't exactly on its toes, I'd say."

The girl's eyes, sea-green in color and attractively large and long-lashed, thanked him. They also looked him over swiftly, seeing a rangy, loose-muscled six-footer with a square, blunt-featured face.

"I'm Pamela Holden," she told him. "You've been awfully nice, Mr.—"

"Say!" the old man behind the desk exclaimed. "Are you Will Holden's girl? By Jehoshaphat, if you ain't! Look just like your ma when she was your age. Too bad about her, Miss Pam. She was a fine woman—a mighty fine woman. Say, didn't Will know you was coming? Boyd and Tod Butler was in town around noontime. Funny they didn't wait for you."

DENNING momentarily was rigid, but fortunately the hotel clerk's outburst had distracted the girl's attention. By the time she had signed the register and handed Keith the pen, he had himself under control. He scrawled his name beneath her neat signature, noted that she gave her place of residence as New York City, and he wrote Fort Worth, Texas, under it. Meantime the old man had found room keys and was waddling around the end of the desk.

"I'm a couple of years younger than you are, Pop," Denning said. "Let me do the toting. Which way is Miss Holden's room?"

Pop managed to look both relieved and knowing. "Number Twenty-seven, to the left. You're in Six, at the other end of the hall. I'm obliged to you, mister. My breathing gets bad when I climb them danged stairs."

Pamela Holden, having taken a quick glance at the register, turned with a smile. "We'll manage. Mr. Denning is an expert at handling baggage."

"Might ask you for a reference some time," Denning said, and grinned.

She went ahead of him up the stairs and along the hall to the left. He liked the way she moved and the shape of her in her rumpled dark green traveling suit, and the proud way she held her head. When they reached the door

numbered "27," about midway between the stairs and the window at the end of the hall, he set down one of the bags he was carrying and twisted the knob while she turned the key.

Dim light from the hall spilled into the room. He went in ahead of her and found the cord that dangled from the ceiling light.

It was a fairly large room with two windows opposite the door. A comfortable-looking bed stood against the wall at the right; there was a matching dresser and washstand of imitation mahogany, and a couple of chairs. The door of a small closet stood ajar. Everything was immaculately clean. He went to one of the windows and looked out before lowering the shade, noting with approval that there was neither balcony nor porch roof between it and the street.

When he turned, the girl was standing near the middle of the room, shivering slightly as she watched him, an enigmatic expression on her lovely face. Without saying anything, he went out into the hall for the bag he'd left there.

"Just put it in the corner by the window," she told him. "I won't need it tonight."

The bag disposed of, he faced her and took off his hat. She stood now with her back to the dresser and again, but more carefully than in the lobby, she looked him over. It was a peculiarly searching scrutiny that seemed to catalogue each individual feature—his dark brown hair, thick and wiry at the temples, waving back from a broad forehead that looked startlingly white in contrast to the deep tan of his lower face; steady, pale gray eyes beneath heavy dark brows; strong blunt nose above a wide firm mouth; solid jaw and stubborn chin. She nodded slightly as if she approved of what she saw.

"It's very late," she said quietly. "And I've really got to get out of these wet clothes, but I'd like to talk to you, Mr. Denning."

There was a directness about her that pleased him. He knew just enough about her to be intrigued by these qualities. At the same time, he was strongly aware of her as one of the most disturbingly attractive girls he'd ever encountered.

"Suppose I smoke a cigarette while you slip on something dry," he suggested. "Will you come down to the lobby?"

She hesitated, looking at him with her strange green eyes slightly narrowed, her lips compressed. They were the kind of lips, even so, that gave a man ideas. After a moment they relaxed.

"I don't make a habit of it," she said, color rising in her cheeks, "but I'm sure you won't—misunderstand. I'd like to talk to you here, where we won't be overheard."

He nodded. "Will ten minutes or so be long enough?"

"Plenty, thanks."

Outside in the hall with the door closed, he paused to roll and light a cigarette. There was a feeling of warmth and excitement in him and an eagerness that he considered carefully. He was frowning when he went along the hall to the room assigned to him. Lightning has a way of striking without warning.

IN HIS ROOM, which was similar to but smaller than the one in which he'd left Pamela Holden, he hung his slicker in the closet, dropped the coat of his mail order serge suit on a chair, and opened his suitcase on the bed. A holstered revolver, wrapped up in a belt, lay on top of a pair of levis, a matching brush jacket, and a few other articles of clothing.

He took the weapon out and buckled the belt around his flat hips, adjusting it so that the long-barreled gun lay snugly against his lean thigh. Then he poured water into the bowl, washed his hands, and ran long fingers through his thick brown hair. Donning his coat again, he snapped off the light and let

"Gentling you will be a pleasure," he murmured. "Behave yourself!"

himself out into the hall.

His booted feet made scarcely a sound on the stairs. The lobby resounded to the snores of Pop, who sat in an armchair with his feet on the ledge of a window in a kind of alcove to the left of the deserted desk. No one else was visible. Rain beat upon the wooden awning above the entrance, and the rush of the wind and the damp smell of the storm came through the open door. The hands of the clock behind the desk stood at twelve twenty-five. For a few seconds Denning peered out into the rain-swept blackness. The saloon across the street, which had been lighted a few minutes ago, was now dark.

"Whoever it was," he thought, "isn't hanging around. She'll be safe enough. It was meant to look like an accident, but I guess that my being a witness upset some plans."

Wheeling, he sent another glance swiftly around the lobby. Pop snored on undisturbed. Keith went to the desk. The register contained the signatures of guests who had stopped at the hotel since the beginning of the calendar year. He carried it out of line with the entrance, thumbed backward two months and ran a long forefinger down a page. The finger paused beneath the signature of Thomas P. Carter, who had registered from Cheyenne, Wyoming, on February tenth.

For a long moment Denning stood there, looking at that signature, squint creases deep around the corners of his slitted eyes, wide lips drawn thin. Then he turned the pages to the one that held his own signature beneath that of Pamela Holden, and replaced the book where he had found it.

A sound, flat with distance, whipped out of the stormy night. Long strides carried him swiftly to the open door. The rain beat upon the wooden awning and the wind made a moaning sound as it swept through the sleeping town. If what he'd heard had been a gunshot, there was no second. He shook his head, wheeled, and went silently up the stairs.

II

PAMELA HOLDEN looked very young and lovely in a padded silk robe with an Oriental pattern. She had slippers on her small feet, and her dark red hair was combed back smoothly, falling loosely to her shoulders. There was warmth in her cheeks, excitement in her sea-green eyes, and a hint of wariness, too.

"Please sit down," she murmured. "I had the porter fill my thermos bottle with hot coffee at suppertime. Would you like some?"

"Fine," he said appreciatively.

She had drawn the room's only comfortable chair near the bed and gestured to it. The thermos bottle and two water glasses stood conveniently on a small stand, and she seated herself on the side of the bed to pour the coffee. There was something almost prim about the way she sat, with her feet close together and the robe fastened snugly about her. He knew that she was breaking every traditional convention to which she had been bred and trained, and the knowledge humbled him even as it whetted his curiosity. Silently he accepted the glass of steaming coffee she handed him.

"Smoke, if you like," she told him, smiling. "I don't care about it myself."

Tongue-tied by his awareness of her, sensitive to the taut nerves that lay behind her composure, he shook his head. Her strange green eyes studied him briefly. Then again she gave proof of her directness.

"It wasn't an accident, Mr. Denning, and I wasn't mistaken for someone else. Will you please tell me exactly what you saw? Who shoved me?"

He shook his head. "A man dressed in dark clothing, I'd say. But it happened too quickly for me to tell even if he was short or tall. You stooped. He shoved. I grabbed. When I looked for him, he was gone." He rubbed the side

of his left thumb against his chin with a soft rasping sound. "Who would want to kill you, Miss Holden?"

Her hands were tightly clasped in her lap, and the color in her cheeks had gathered into two bright spots. "I—don't know. Oh, it's unbelievable!"

"Murder is always unbelievable," he said quietly. "But there's always a reason for it, I reckon."

There was no color at all in her face now. Her eyes were wide and blank, looking at him, but obviously not seeing him. Something in her own thoughts, some sudden realization, plainly had shocked her more than anything he had said. He waited, watching her, sipping his coffee. When he set the empty glass on the stand, that slight sound seemed to break the spell. Her strange eyes narrowed, and for a moment studied him with a coolly impersonal and almost calculating detachment.

His square-jawed, brown-skinned face stiffened beneath that scrutiny. He was about to rise to his feet when her lips quirked and she leaned forward tensely.

"I owe you so much, Mr. Denning, that I hate to impose upon you. But I—" She hesitated and he was aware of the stiffness of her slender body beneath the padded robe. "Forgive me for being inquisitive," she went on more quietly. "You're also a stranger in Topok, aren't you?"

"First time I've been here." He nodded. Then he smiled and drawled, "Two strangers in Topok—sounds like a title for a book or a movie. How can I help you, Miss Holden?"

She took a quick breath, her firm young breasts rising against the padded robe. "You look like a—a cowboy, a cattleman. You look—" Unexpectedly her cheeks turned crimson and instead of completing what she had started to say, she asked hurriedly, "Are you here on business? Or are you—free?"

It was oddly worded, but her embarrassment pleased him. He smiled. "Sort of prospecting around. If there's anything I can do for you, I'll be glad to do it." Something caused him to add, softly, "You can trust me, Miss Holden."

For an instant she looked startled. "I'm sure I can!" Then she smiled crookedly and said, "Between us, we make it sound very melodramatic. But—well, I've never been shoved under a moving train before. I guess I'm not very brave. It scares me!"

"It was a close call," he said soberly. I don't blame you for being scared."

She nodded and a shadow seemed to fall across her face, and for a long moment she sat with her head tilted forward, frowning at the toe of one of her slippers. He didn't blame her for being scared. He wondered if he should tell her what had brought him to Topok. If she knew, perhaps he could persuade her to catch an eastbound train tomorrow without going out to the B C H Ranch.

"What makes it worse," she said in a soft voice, "is that I've had a—a sort of premonition, ever since I started West. I kept telling myself it was imagination, but you see,"—she glanced at him quickly, then again looked at the toe of her slipper—"my mother died, after a long illness, about four weeks ago. We were very close to each other. Losing her was—a terrible shock."

HE MURMURED sympathetically. She cleared the huskiness out of her voice, and what she told him next fitted in with some of the things he knew. Her parents had separated when she was nine years old, and since then she and her mother had lived in the East, always together even when she was at school and college.

"I haven't seen my father in nearly twelve years," she said. "I'll be twenty-one next month. And I can hardly remember the West."

She paused, her lips compressed, her eyes narrowed as her thoughts seemed to turn inward. It surprised him to

learn that she was nearly twenty-one. She looked scarcely more than sixteen in that padded robe, with her hair loose about her shoulders.

"It wasn't until just before she died that mother told me about the B C H Ranch," she continued. "Her maiden name was Bailey. Grandfather Bailey was one of the founders, and Grandfather Holden was one, too."

Denning was listening now with even closer attention. He knew about the B C H Ranch, because the grandfather of his friend, Tom Carter, had also been one of the founders. Bailey, Carter and Holden had been pioneer cattlemen in Topok Valley. Partners in the old-fashioned way peculiar to the West, what they'd owned, they'd owned jointly. Before they died, they'd drawn up a formal partnership agreement and executed identical wills making it binding upon their heirs, creating what in effect was a trust for their grandchildren. Will Holden, Pamela's father, had been designated executor-trustee and manager of the big ranch.

There were some peculiar angles to the setup. Tom Carter had discovered them when, six months ago, his father had died and he'd come into his inheritance. One of the angles was that the direct heirs of the original partners were prohibited from disposing of their shares in the estate, even by selling to each other. During their lifetimes they had to be content with splitting the net income between them.

But the grandchildren of the three old-timers—Tom Carter and Pamela Holden were the only ones—were not so bound. They could do as they liked—sell out, demand a liquidation and distribution of the entire estate, or continue to draw only the income. Another angle was that if either of the direct heirs died without issue, or if the issue should die before reaching the age of twenty-one, his or her share passed to the survivor.

"Mother never spoke of Father," the girl was saying in her soft voice. "I have no idea why they separated and lived apart for so many years. But he must be a strange man."

On her death bed, Ellen Bailey Holden had told her daughter that now she, Pamela, would own the Bailey third of the B C H Ranch, which had been the source of their means all those years. So, after Ellen died, Pam had written to her father for the first time. He'd replied immediately, offering to buy her interest in the ranch for a cash amount to be agreed upon between himself and anyone she might designate to represent her.

"It was a strange letter for a girl to receive from her father," Pam said. "So cold and—and formal. But—well, I thought how lonely he must have been all these years, so instead of writing to him again I decided to come and get acquainted with him."

Denning nodded. It seemed entirely natural to him that, in her new loneliness and sense of loss, she should have turned to her next of kin, the father who, after twelve years, was a stranger, but still her father. It would not have occurred to her that Will Holden might not want her.

"Didn't you let him know you were coming?"

"I sent him a telegram yesterday from the train. But he couldn't have got it."

Telegrams have a way of reaching their destinations, and the old clerk downstairs had mentioned that a couple of men—Boyd and Tod Butler—had been in town from the B C H around noon. Denning didn't like the way this stacked up. It looked like a repetitive pattern. Tom Carter hadn't sent a telegram, of course, but a letter would serve the same purpose. How much should he tell Pamela Holden? He had a pretty good idea of what she was going to ask him to do. Maybe he could persuade her to take the morning train east.

"The storm could be responsible," she was saying. "Perhaps my telegram didn't get here until those two men went

back to the ranch. I don't suppose messages are delivered out here as they are in a big city like New York."

"No," he agreed. "If they aren't picked up, they go in the mail." Then, quietly, he said, "We're getting off the trail, aren't we? What is it you wanted me to do, Miss Holden? If it's to represent you in selling your interest in the B C H to your father, you might be taking a big chance. You know nothing about me."

THE DIRECT way she looked at him indicated that she had already considered this. "You told me I could trust you," she said. "And I believe I can. What happened at the depot makes me sure that something is terribly wrong out at the B C H! Perhaps whoever shoved me under the train thought that if I wasn't killed, I'd at least be so badly scared that I'd catch the first train back to New York. I am scared, but I'm not going to run away. I came here to see my father, and I'm going to see him. I'm also going to find out who tried to kill me, and why."

With her green eyes steadily upon him, she rose to her feet. Whatever else he might have thought of her, he was filled with admiration now. She was no fool, and while she was trembling with nervous tension and admitted that she was afraid, she had what in a man would be called guts.

"So you see," she concluded, "it isn't just business advice I want: It's something more. I want you to help me to stay alive!"

"What does the name Tom Carter mean to you, Miss Holden?" he asked quietly.

Surprise widened her eyes. "Why, there's a Tom Carter whose grandfather was the third partner when the B C H was founded. But you—you told me your name was—"

"Keith Denning." He nodded. "Tom's my partner, Miss Holden. I think you'd better sit down while I tell you about him."

Something in his expression must have impressed her, for she sat down as abruptly as if her knees had given away. "What about him? Is he out at the B C H? If he is—"

He shook his head. "I don't know where he is. That's why I'm here. Two months ago, early in February, he left our ranch near Cheyenne and came down here to see about selling his share in the B C H. He signed the register downstairs on February tenth. I got one letter from him, postmarked here that same date. Two letters I sent him —one addressed to General Delivery and the other in care of Will Holden— came back. He disappeared somewhere between this town and the B C H."

"Disappeared!" she whispered, staring at him. There was no color in her face and her lips trembled as she pressed them together. "But why? How could he disappear?"

"That's what I came to find out," he said grimly. "As to the why, I've got some ideas. But it's late now and you're plumb wore out." His glance softened as he looked down at her, and his voice became gentle. "It makes us partners in the proposition, Miss Pam. You get some sleep and in the morning we'll work out a plan."

Again she stood up, a tired girl with nerves too tautly strung, looking at him in a strange way as she held out her hand and he took it in his bigger one. "Good night, Keith," she murmured. "I've never believed in fate, but I'm beginning to now!"

The impulse to take her into his arms and kiss her was almost irresistible, but deep within him something whispered that this was not the time. He lifted her hand to his lips and went out of the room, closing the door quietly behind him. In the hall he waited until he heard her key turn in the lock.

III

IT WAS a cool gray morning, with a gale tearing through the town and

clouds shifting about in the sky without giving the sun a chance to break through. Looking out of the window as he tucked the tail of his wool shirt in the levis with which he'd replaced his store clothing, Keith Denning opined that the storm was not yet over and speculated upon the likelihood that it might keep anyone from coming in from the B C H that day.

Then there was a knock at the door and he called, "Right with you!" thinking that Pamela must have got the jump on him. But when he opened the door, it wasn't the girl who stood there.

"You Denning?" queried a stockily built man with the badge of town marshal pinned to his chest. "Want to talk to you."

"You make early calls," Keith said drily. "What's on your mind?"

"Name's Porter," the lawman stated, crowding past him into the room. "You came in on the Limited last night, did you?"

HE HAD a tight-lipped, big-nosed face and shrewd hazel eyes that swept the room searchingly. Keith nodded, curbing his resentment of the way the man had barged in.

"You and Miss Holden," Porter went on gruffly. "I'll talk to her later. Who'd you see at the depot?"

At the other end of the hall a door closed, and the sound of footsteps caused a feeling of excitement to stir through Keith swiftly. But his mind was upon the marshal's question, and another that had been in the background of his own thoughts since the night before.

"It was too dark to see much of anything," he replied. "Seemed queer that the station agent wasn't around, even if we were four hours late."

"He was around," Porter stated grimly. "Wasn't there no lights in the depot?"

Denning shook his head. "If the agent was around, neither Miss Holden nor I saw him."

"Good morning, Keith," said the girl herself. "I heard your voice and—oh, I'm so sorry!"

Framed in the open door, she made a picture worth any man's attention. She wore a khaki divided skirt and blouse, riding boots, and a silk scarf, the color matching the green of her eyes, knotted loosely about her slender neck. Her heavy dark red hair was combed back and drawn into a bun at the back of her head. She looked alert and rested, and it seemed to Keith that during the night she had changed from a frightened girl into a mature woman. He could not help regretting the change, although it made her none the less lovely and desirable.

"This is Town Marshal Porter, Miss Holden," he said quietly. "He wanted to know if we saw anyone at the depot last night. What did you mean, Porter, when you said that the station agent was around even if we didn't see him?"

Porter had his hat off and was staring at Pam admiringly. The question brought his eyes around to Denning and he did not seem to like the change of view. He scowled, flicked another swift glance at Pam, and explained what he meant. It seemed that Bill Ward, the Topok station agent, had a helper who took the late trick as telegraph operator and kept the depot open until after the Limited had passed through. This morning, when this Ed Keeley had opened up the depot at the regular hour, he'd taken one look and hustled off to find the town marshal.

"Whoever done it," Porter growled, "snuck up behind Bill Ward and beat him over the head with an iron bar or maybe a gun-barrel."

"Dead?" Keith asked.

"As he'll ever be."

"How awful!" Pam exclaimed in a tight voice. "The poor man!"

"Must of happened before the Limited come in," Porter said. "Depot was dark, you say. And Tom wasn't on hand. Sure you didn't see nobody skulking around?"

Denning considered swiftly. He flung

a quick glance at Pam, discovered that she was watching him, her eyes enormous in her white face. Obviously the murder of Tom Ward had been a forerunner to the attack upon her, but was anything to be gained by telling Porter of that attack? Neither of them could identify the man who had shoved her beneath the train.

"We didn't see anything that would help you, I'm afraid," Keith said quietly. "But I heard something that you might look into. After we'd registered and gone up to our rooms, I went down to the lobby to ask Pop if he had received any mail for me. He was asleep, so I didn't bother him. But I heard a gunshot—off north of town, I'd say. That was about twelve thirty-five."

"Huh!" snorted Porter. "Maybe somebody took a shot at a coyote. Well, I'm obliged to you. And to you, Miss Holden." He smiled admiringly at Pam and added, "Too bad your train was so late, else you'd of caught Boyd and Tod Butler before they left town. Your wire must of come in late, too. Bill Ward had it on his desk, ready to put in the B C H box at the post office this morning."

PAM seemed about to say something, but checked herself with a quick glance at Keith, and moved aside to let Porter pass. The marshal clumped along the hall and started down the stairs.

"Keith!" Pam breathed unsteadily. "It gets worse and worse! But shouldn't we have told him?"

Keith shook his head. "It wouldn't help him and it might have got us tied up here. He could hold us as what they call material witnesses. But the material is mighty thin and I want to do some checking up. Likewise, the best thing for you to do is catch the first train back East."

"The best thing you can do," she retorted, "is get rid of that idea. I have no intention of going anywhere except to the B C H Ranch."

She gave him a straight look that told him that no argument of his would induce her to change her mind.

"Got your ears laid back and your hoofs planted solid, have you?" he drawled, smiling. "Well, I don't believe in arguing before breakfast. It tears a man down."

They ate in the hotel dining room, at a small table near the window where they could talk without being overheard. The high wind whipped spatters of rain against the window as they were served, and he used this as an argument to persuade her to remain in town at the hotel, since she flatly refused to catch the eastbound train, while he hired a car or a rig and went out to the B C H.

"I'd feel safer with you than alone here," she told him firmly. "And, after all, it's my father I'm going to see."

There was no answer to that. He had his own idea of how Will Holden would welcome her, but he could always bring her back to town. What he didn't like was having his own movements restricted by the obligation of safeguarding her against another possible attack upon her life.

"Okay," he surrendered. "But when we get out there, please don't say anything about Tom Carter. Not even to your father. Just introduce me as the man you fetched along to look the ranch over and advise you what to do about selling."

Something like a shadow brushed across her face. "Surely you don't think my father would—"

"What I'm thinking," he interposed quietly, "is that we can't afford to take any chances. I'm thinking that whoever tried to kill you last night did kill the night station agent, who might have been a witness, and fixed it to look as if the telegram you sent the day before yesterday didn't get through until last night. I'm thinking that whoever planned this had a hand in Tom Carter's disappearance."

"But my own father!" Pam exclaimed in a shocked voice. "Surely we can trust him!"

Denning didn't answer that. He lifted his coffee cup and drank from it, looking at her over the rim. Something flickered in her expressive eyes, and the color drained out of her cheeks. After a moment she said, "Marshal Porter spoke of two B C H men who were in town yesterday—Boyd and Tod Butler."

"The old-timer who gave us rooms last night mentioned them, too." Keith nodded. Then an odd inflection in her voice registered its impression upon him, caused him to eye her narrowly. "You've been away so many years, I didn't suppose you knew them."

"I'm not sure," she murmured thoughtfully. "Boyd could be Boyd Holden, my father's youngest brother. I remember him vaguely."

Her vague memory could not be a pleasant one, he thought, judging by the way she frowned over it, but she added nothing to what she had said. They finished their breakfast in silence and were about to rise from the table when Marshal Porter appeared at the lobby door, located them, and came hastily toward them.

"What time was it when you heard that gunshot?" he demanded abruptly of Keith.

Denning stood up, noting the baffled and angry expression in the lawman's face. "Twelve-thirty or close to it, as I told you. What's up? Did you find the coyote that got shot? Must have a queer breed in this country to be on the prowl on a stormy night like it was."

"Two-legged," Porter said gruffly. "Fellow named Gabe Spears. Pete Morgan found him alongside the road just north of town, shot through the head. He ain't no great loss, but I'd like to know just what the hell's busted loose here! Two killings in a night, when we ain't had none for over a year. Maybe you better do some explaining, mister."

KEITH didn't like the sound of that. He hoped Porter wasn't going to be unreasonable. He said quietly, "I've explained all I know. Maybe this Spears was killed by whoever killed the station agent last night. Maybe he saw the killer.

"Yeah," Porter growled. "Maybe he did. Maybe you—"

"How ridiculous!" Pam exclaimed. "Mr. Denning and I came in on the Limited, and we've told you that the depot was dark. You can check up on that easily. The porter mentioned it when he helped me get off with my luggage. And we came right here to the hotel and registered, which you can also check."

"Have," grunted the marshal. "But I dunno. Soon as you hit town, Denning, two men turn up dead. What's your business here?"

"It isn't wholesale murder," Keith retorted. "You're wasting your time, Porter. Miss Holden is going out to the B C H to discuss with Will Holden an offer to buy out her interest in the ranch. She's hired me to advise her."

"That's right." The girl nodded. "We're driving out this morning."

Porter scowled and rubbed his chin. "All right," he acceded grumpily. "But I'm reporting this to the sheriff, and he might want to talk to you."

Then, wheeling abruptly, he stalked away. Denning grinned wryly down at Pam, murmuring, "The plot thickens. We better get out of town before he changes his mind and locks me up in his hoosegow."

"But you didn't have anything to do with those—those murders!"

"I made the mistake of telling him I heard a shot last night," Keith replied. "Seems like a man should be born with hobbles on his tongue. It would sure keep him out of a lot of trouble."

They left town an hour later in a used car Keith bought when it proved impossible to rent one. It wasn't much of a car, but it ran fairly well and the owner of the Topok Garage told him that the B C H Ranch was a good forty miles north, along a graded but unpaved road, too great a distance to be traveled with any comfort on such a

day in a horse drawn vehicle. He also said that this was the second car he'd sold recently to a man who wanted to drive out to the B C H.

"Made a deal with him, too, to buy it back. But he must of changed his mind. I never saw him again. Mighty nice feller, he was. Name of—let's see—Carter, or something like. Said he came from Wyoming."

"Was this the car you sold him?" Denning asked, playing dumb.

"Hell, no!" The garage man, a lanky young fellow in greasy overalls, shook his head. "Like I said, I never saw him again. Anyhow that was a Ford coupé, good as new. Reckon he liked traveling in it bettern' in a train."

A car, Keith thought as he drove back to the hotel, wasn't as easy to dispose of as a horse, but it could be done. This was mountain country, with many a hidden canyon where a car could be driven over a cliff and demolished. If there had been any question in his mind regarding what had happened to his partner, there was none now.

He told Pam what he'd learned, trying again to persuade her to let him go alone to the ranch. But she only gave him a strange look and said quietly that he was wasting his breath.

IV

THE gale had subsided a little from its early morning frenzy, but a drizzling rain had set in and there was a raw and penetrating chill to the air. The road began to climb as soon as Keith and Pam reached the outskirts of town, and they entered a world of limited visibility, walled around by the grim and ghostlike shapes of trees and boulders, with the menacing shadows of the mountains in the background. It was a narrow road and the rain had softened its surface. He drove carefully, not trying to make time, disturbingly aware of the girl beside him, although there was little conversation between them.

"It's odd," she said, out of a long silence. "I feel as if I'd known you for years. But at this time yesterday, I didn't know that there was such a person as Keith Denning."

"Puts me one up on you," he drawled. "I knew there was a Pamela Holden."

The car speeded up a little as they crested a long rise and the road tipped down ahead of them. Yes, he'd known there was a Pamela Holden who, under the provisions of her grandfather's will, would one day own two-thirds of the ranchhouse whose other third his partner had inherited and planned to sell. He'd kidded Tom Carter about that girl. What was the sense of working and worrying over the stocking of a new ranch when all he had to do was marry that girl and live easy the rest of his life? Denning's cheeks burned as he remembered this.

"What's the matter?" Pam asked lightly. "Didn't I live up to your expectations, Keith?"

"Don't rush me," he murmured, grinning. "I never did believe in snap judgments."

Abruptly his grin vanished and his lips thinned out. Ahead of them a crude barricade of brush, small boulders and what looked like a pole gate torn from a barbed-wire fence, blocked the road. The slope of the hill rose steeply to the left, dropped less steeply to the right. The moving shapes of men and horses loomed through the drizzle on either side of the barricade.

"Duck!" he snapped. "And hang on!"

His foot went down hard on the gas pedal. The rear wheels spun in the mud, then the car leaped forward. Pam slid down onto the floor. A man yelled harshly. The wham of a gunshot cut through the roar of the motor and the rush of the wind. His squinting gaze on the end of the barricade, Denning shifted the wheel a trifle. The car swerved to the right. The left front fender caught barbed-wire and a hub cap jarred against the boulder.

Horses reared and plunged frantically. There was a moment of pandemoni-

um. The car struck something, bounced, seemed to rear up on its hind wheels and shake itself. Then it was back on the road, streaking away like a scared jack-rabbit, followed by a single gunshot that went wild.

"All in one piece, Pam?" Keith asked anxiously, not daring to take his eyes off the road. "That was pretty rough."

"Are you telling me? I'll bet I've got the finest assortment of bruises in Arizona." She laughed ruefully as she slid up into the seat and laid her small hand over his big one on the wheel. "But I'm all right—and you got us through."

He didn't say anything. If a better spot had been picked to stop them, he thought, they wouldn't have got through. He wished that this girl, with all her courage and her loveliness, had stayed in town or, better yet, gone back East. He wondered again what kind of a welcome awaited them at the B C H Ranch.

The ranch buildings stood on high ground at the north end of Topok Valley. Foothills jumbled up behind them, mounting in steep pine-clad slopes to the solid bulk of the mountain which thrust snow-capped peaks into the lowering sky. The eerie moaning of the wind in the pines rose above the sounds made by the car, and the drizzling rain enveloped the buildings in a gray and clammy shroud, blurring their outlines, lending them a desolate and vaguely menacing appearance. Pam moved a little closer to Keith, and he sensed the tension and the uncertainty that was in her.

"What a dreary looking place! It doesn't look a bit familiar. Golly, Keith, I almost wish I hadn't come!"

He could have reminded her that she'd insisted upon coming against his desire and advice. Instead, he said, "If the sun was shining it would look different. You'll feel better once you're inside."

"Once I've met him," she murmured, so softly that he barely heard. "I wonder—"

WHAT she wondered she kept to herself, but he understood that at least part of her uneasiness had to do with meeting the father she had not seen for twelve years. Not for the first time he wished he knew what had caused the break between Will Holden and his wife; why they had separated and lived apart so many years. Such things almost inevitably leave scars. He was vitally interested in the essential character of Will Holden, past and present. The reputation a man creates in the business world does not necessarily reflect the real man. Will Holden was reputedly a man who drove a hard, shrewd bargain, but who was scrupulously honest.

"But Tom Carter disappeared after he left Topok," Keith said to himself. "And last night two men were wiped out and somebody shoved Pam under that train." Denning shook his head slightly, his jaws hard set, studying the layout of buildings as they neared the front of the ranchhouse. "It's all tied up with the old partnership agreement and the wills of the three old-timers. Nobody stands to gain, as far as I can see, except Holden. But would a man kill his own daughter?"

"Doesn't seem to be anyone at home," Pam said in a small, tight voice.

The car rolled slowly up onto the level where the buildings stood, solid and substantial now that the mist no longer obscured them, but somehow still grim and unfriendly. The wide porch of the huge ranchhouse seemed to scowl at them. The only sign of life was the curl of smoke that the high wind whipped away from the chimney of what apparently was the cook house.

"Since we aren't expected," Denning drawled, "we shouldn't count on a welcoming committee. But I don't like to see a gal disappointed, so I'll see what I can stir up."

He pressed the horn button and braked to a stop at the foot of the front steps. The raucous blare blasted through the moaning of the pines and whipped

away on the wind. He was out of the car, rounding the front of it to help Pam out when the house door opened. The man who came across the porch was one of the biggest men he had ever seen—a veritable giant who looked to be at least seven feet tall and was broad in proportion, yet who moved as lithely and stepped as lightly as a ballet dancer.

"What's the trouble, stranger?" the big man asked in a deep, rumbling voice. "Get lost in the storm?"

He looked down at Keith with frost-gray eyes, deep-set beneath bushy black brows. His features were bold and strong, and his broad face was deeply tanned, young-looking in spite of the gray in his thick black hair. Something inside of Denning drew tight and hard as he returned the steady, searching stare of this man.

"If this is the B C H Ranch," he said, "we aren't lost."

"This is the B C H," the big man rumbled.

The car door opened, and Pam looked out. "You aren't my father," she said. "You must be Uncle Boyd."

She stepped out as she spoke, and it seemed to Denning that Boyd Holden's big body stiffened as if he'd been hit an unexpected blow. For a moment he stared down at the girl, his broad face as unreadable as a square of well-tanned leather. Pam stared back at him, chin up, head high, green eyes slightly narrowed.

Then another man came out of the house and advanced across the porch, a man as big as Boyd Holden, with the same frost-gray eyes and bold strong features, but with a grizzled mustache drooping over his firm mouth, and with thinning hair that was almost white. There was a look of weariness about this man, and a look of worry. His broad shoulders stooped a little and his face was deeply lined, almost haggard. He looked years older than Boyd.

"Father!" Pam cried softly. "Don't you—remember me?"

It was a strange thing, that meeting of father and daughter. Denning saw how they looked at each other, saw the stern weariness of Will Holden's broad face give way to an expression of startled unbelief. He saw the two of them move toward each other as if drawn by a powerful magnet until, with a gesture he would always remember, Pam lifted her small hands to her father's stooped shoulders and stood on tiptoe to kiss him, and with a muffled cry Will Holden hugged her close.

"Pam! Little Pam! Child, why didn't you let me know you were coming? I would have—"

"I did, Dad," the girl murmured. "I sent a telegram, but—"

"By the Lord, Will!" Boyd Holden rumbled. "She's the spitting image of Ellen, ain't she? Got a kiss for me, too, chicken?"

"I see no reason for kissing you," Pam retorted coolly. "And my name, since you seem to have forgotten it, is Pamela!"

FOR an instant Boyd Holden stared. Then he tipped back his head and burst into a roar of laughter. "By the Lord, Will, you've bred a wildcat! Damned if you ain't! I'll try not to get the breeds mixed again, Miss Pamela!"

Watching alertly, Denning observed that Pam and her father weren't amused. The girl looked angry, but what interested him most was the troubled expression in Will Holden's face. Then he became aware that another man was now standing at the corner of the house as if he'd come around from the rear and was silently taking in the scene. This was a tall, slim young man in levis and brush jacket, with a wide-brimmed hat on his head and a holstered gun hugging each lean thigh. Before Keith had time to see more than this, Pam was introducing him to her father.

Denning shook hands with both of the big men. Then a gesture from Boyd brought the tall, slim young fellow from the corner of the house. He turned out to be Tod Butler, B C H range boss. He

also turned out to be a remarkably handsome man, with ash-blond hair, cold blue eyes, and the features of a collar ad model.

"I hope you don't decide to sell, Miss Holden," he said, in a soft, almost purring voice. "It would be mighty nice if you'd stay with us."

"Made a conquest already, kitten," rumbled Boyd Holden. "And you could do worse. Tod's an all right man."

"I'll place your recommendation on file," Pam said coolly.

But she smiled at Butler in a friendly way, and Denning didn't like it. Only a gunslick would pack two weapons as Butler did, and he was instinctively distrustful of male beauties. Pam was a mixture of sophistication and innocence, with a warm-hearted impulsiveness in her that might on occasion get the better of her judgment. He didn't want her to get hurt. She was in for a rough enough time, he believed, without getting herself involved with a man like Tod Butler.

"It isn't because I'm jealous or likely to be," he thought grimly. "I've got a job to do corralling a killer, and there's three prime suspects right here. If it turns out that Will Holden is a scheming crook, she isn't going to like me for proving it."

His thinking, he realized, was somewhat confused. What he needed was to get off in a corner and straighten himself out.

Nothing must interfere with his reaching his objective. Pam appealed to him differently and more strongly than any girl had ever done, but this was no time to allow his emotions to get out of control. He'd need all his wits and judgment, if he was to get to the bottom of the plot that had resulted in Tom Carter's disappearance, and the killing of two men and the attempted killing of Pam last night.

"What're we standing out here for?" Boyd Holden rumbled. "Come inside, Denning. Lend him a hand with the baggage, Tod."

It would have suited Denning better to bunk in with the crew, but they would not listen to it. He was being accepted, it appeared, as a Texas cattleman whom Pam had known for some time.

The house was a huge rambling affair of many rooms, each of which opened out onto a roofed gallery. He carried Pam's luggage in, having the edge on Butler in that respect, and thus learned that she was to occupy the room she'd had as a child. It was a pleasant room, with two windows facing south.

"It's just as I remember it!" the girl exclaimed. "Nothing has been changed. Why, I don't believe it's been used since I went away! See, there's a doll I forgot. And how I cried!"

She picked the doll up and hugged it, her eyes shining with tears. Butler looked in at the door and smiled, a much too handsome man, much too sure of himself.

"It'll be nice having a lady in the house," he said. "The old man never had let anyone sleep in this room—or that one." He gestured toward the room adjoining the bathroom. Then, in a different tone," he said, "You're in the other wing, Denning. I'll show you."

"Obliged," Keith murmured, and went out into the gallery, closing the door behind him on the girl who had come home.

V

ABSENTLY Keith noted, as he followed Tod Butler around to the other wing, the catlike way the man moved, effortless, smoothly flowing as water. A dangerous man, he thought, a man who always knew what he wanted and never hesitated about going after it. A man who would have no scruples against making love to his boss' daughter, especially if she happened to own an independent third share in the ranch that hired him.

What was the exact relationship between Tod Butler and Boyd Holden? It

was a different relationship than the one between Tod and Will Holden. The glance of an eye, the inflection of a voice was enough to establish that.

"And this handsome gink is a killer if I ever saw one! Damn! I wish I'd come out here alone and struck for a riding job."

Butler opened the door back to let Keith enter with his shabby suitcase. This was a smaller room than Pam's, with a single window facing east, but pleasant enough and furnished better than the run of ranchhouse rooms. He set the suitcase on the bed.

"This is fine," he said, looking at the man in the door.

"Come in on the Limited yesterday, did you?" Butler asked. "You and Miss Pam? Too bad it was so late. Boyd and I was in town earlier."

"So I heard."

"Could of saved you renting a car. Or did Gallager sell it to you?"

This plainly was leading up to something. Denning admitted that he'd bought the car. Butler rolled up a smoke in one deft motion and struck a match. The flame made his blue eyes look like polished agates.

"Have any trouble finding your way out?"

"Followed the main road," Denning said. "No trouble about that."

Their eyes met and held together for a moment. Then the B C H range boss tipped his head, wheeled, and went away, his boot heels clacking on the gallery's tiled floor. . . .

Pam undressed slowly while water ran into the tub in the bathroom between her room and the one that had been her mother's. Like her own, her mother's room was exactly as she remembered it. It even seemed to her, when she opened the closet door that the scent of her mother's perfume lingered there. The strangeness of this impressed her strongely in spite of the new and poignant sense of loss that came to her.

The meeting with her father had proved much easier than she'd feared it would be. She'd remembered him as a grim, stern man, towering over her and the mother to whose skirts she clung, an angry man saying angry words in his deep, rumbling voice. That memory had almost ceased her to turn back when she'd reached Chicago on her way West. She was glad now that she hadn't. As soon as she'd looked into his deeply lined face, she'd known she'd done the right thing. She knew now that he was a tired and troubled man, aged beyond his years, possibly ill, but above all a lonely man, ever since her mother left him.

"Why did they separate?" she wondered. "It's strange Mother never would talk about him."

It was more than strange, for she and her mother had been so close to each other, more like sisters than mother and child. It was strange, too, that even on her death bed Ellen Holden had not suggested that Pam might return to the B C H Ranch and her father. Yet Pam knew that Will Holden was truly glad to have her back. The way he'd taken her into his arms and hugged her left no room for doubt. Why, then, had he written that coldly formal letter, offering to buy her Bailey share of the ranch?

"And who," she thought, frowning at the bruises on her legs as she pulled off her stockings, "tried to kill me last night? And what about that business on the way out? Dad didn't know I was coming. I'm as sure of that as I am that he loves me. He must never know that I suspected him of wanting me dead!"

But someone had wanted her dead. Shoving her under the train couldn't have been an accident, and it couldn't have been that she'd been mistaken for someone else. No other passengers had got off the train. Just herself and Keith Denning. Could Keith have shoved her, then changed his mind and dragged her back?

She frowned more deeply over that. It was possible, of course. There might

even be a motive, since if she died first, Tom Carter in due course would fall heir to the entire estate of their three grandfathers. Keith was Tom's partner, and he'd told her that they needed money to stock their Wyoming ranch.

But he'd also claimed that Tom had disappeared somewhere between Topok and the B C H. If both she and Tom were out of the way, and if it could be proved that Tom died after she did, could Keith by any means benefit? She didn't know. There might be some legal angle that would enable him to claim Tom's inheritance along with the ranch they owned as partners.

"But if he meant to kill me," she continued to herself, stepping into the tub, "he must have changed his mind twice. Those men who had the road blocked meant business. They wore masks and they shot at us. And two men were killed in town last night. Darn it, I'm all mixed up!"

SHE was indeed. And, slipping down into the warm water to soak her bruises, she became increasingly confused when she thought about Keith Denning. He was unlike any other man she'd ever met, and she'd met a lot of them in college and afterward. She'd even fancied herself in love with one or two. There was one, as a matter of fact, who kissed her good-by at the station in New York, and vowed that if she didn't return soon he'd come after her. But not even Ted Kennedy's kiss had made her heart behave in quite the way the mere touch of Keith Denning's strong hand did.

"Silly!" she murmured, sitting up and rubbing her face hard with the wash cloth. "He isn't interested in anything except finding out what happened to Tom Carter!"

Suddenly she was very still, sitting in the warm water, staring at the wash cloth but not seeing it. For another possibility had come to her, and it made her feel sick. Suppose Keith Denning *had* changed his mind twice? Suppose he'd hauled her out from under the train in obedience to an impulse which he'd subsequently regretted, and had planned to have her kidnaped on the road to the B C H and taken to wherever Tom Carter had already been taken. And suppose he'd changed his mind about that because he'd discovered that she was falling for him, and had decided that marrying her would be the quickest and surest way to get what he wanted! So he'd taken advantage of a ready-made opportunity to play hero and now—

"Oh, golly!" Pam whispered. "I don't want to believe that!"

But there it was. Slowly and carefully and with unnecessary force she wrung out the wash cloth and hung it over the side of the tub. Then she stood up, reached for a towel, and began to dry herself, rubbing briskly where her assortment of bruises would permit.

Resolutely, as she found clean underthings and began to dress, she turned her thoughts away from Keith and considered instead something she had so far deliberately avoided. It was almost a relief now to think about her father's younger brother. Her reluctance to do so before stemmed from the vague memory she had mentioned to Keith, which even now refused to come clearly into focus. But it had to do also with the way she'd felt when she'd recognized him as he came across the porch, and with the revulsion that had choked her when he'd asked mockingly if she had a kiss for him, too. She had no great confidence in the infallibility of intuition, but in this case illusive memory supported intuition. She dropped a sheer silk slip over her head, twisted it down over her hips, and picked up her comb from the dresser.

"He's a lot younger than Dad," she thought, frowning into the mirror as she set to work on her hair. "And he looks younger than I'm sure he must be. I wonder why Mother never mentioned him, either? There's so much she might have told me that I need to know! Such as why Grandfather Holden

left Uncle Boyd out of his will and made Dad his sole heir."

Needing more light, she went to one of the windows to lift the shade, and stood for a moment, comb in hand, looking out into the ranch yard. Then she heard a soft click behind her and wheeled with a startled gasp.

"I didn't hear you knock—what are you doing here?"

"Come to have a little talk with you," Boyd Holden rumbled.

He stood with his back to the door whose closing click had startled her, and now he came toward her, stepping as lightly as a ballet dancer. There was an odd glint in his frost-gray eyes, and an odd smile on his broad, ruddy face. He looked her up and down in a way that made her aware that she was between him and the window, clad only in that sheer silk slip. She snatched the padded robe from the bed and pulled it hastily around her. The big man chuckled softly.

"Ain't embarrassed, are you, kitten? No need to be. Not with your looks and shape. By the Lord!" he said softly. "I thought Ellen had everything, but you're prettier'n she was, and you've got more—"

"Get out!" Pam cried furiously. "Get out of my room!"

She started past him toward the door, but ran into a powerful arm that stopped her as abruptly as if she'd run into a solid wall. And his big hands gripped her shoulders with just enough pressure to let her know that, strong as she was, she could not break that grip.

"Got more temper'n Ellen had, too," he rumbled. "That's the Holden in you. She was stubborn as all get out, but there wasn't no fire in her. Now take it easy, kitten. I come to have a little talk with you."

PAM'S temper seethed, but there was nothing she could do except scream and make a scene, which she didn't want to do. It was sure to have awkward consequences. Along with her explosive temper, there always had been in her a strangely contrary streak of cool reason. It asserted itself now. This man, no matter what else, was her uncle. He had come to tell her something privately, and the quicker he told it, the quicker she'd be rid of him and in possession of information that might be valuable.

"Say what you have to say and get out," she said coldly. "And be sure that I'll keep my door locked after this!"

His hands dropped from her shoulders. "Thought there must be a brain or two in that red head," he growled. "Who's this Denning?"

It wasn't what she'd expected. She experienced an inexplicable feeling of relief, and at the same time her alertness quickened. "I thought I made it clear. Dad said I should have someone advise me what my interest in the ranch is worth, so I—"

"Where'd you find him?"

Pam's lips tightened. There might be some confusion in her mind regarding Keith, but there was none regarding her uncle. Her instinctive distrust of him was stronger now than it had ever been. She lied deliberately. She said that Denning was a Texas cattleman who had been recommended to her by a mutual friend.

"So," Boyd Holden grunted, peering down at her shrewdly. "You wouldn't be in love with him, would you, kitten?"

To her dismay, Pam flushed hotly, and that set off her temper again. "No, I wouldn't be in love with him!" she flared. "Besides, it's none of your business! And if this is what you came bursting into my room to talk about, you can get out—right now! I'm tired. I want to rest and finish dressing."

"Mighty pretty when you heat up," he rumbled placidly. "Something else Ellen didn't have." Then, as she started again toward the door, he checked her again, growling, "Knowing about Denning is important. You sure he's the man your friend recommended? You sure you've got a mutual friend?"

"I'm sure I've had more than enough of your silly questions!" she declared stormily. "Now will you please get out?"

"Not yet," he cut in gruffly. "Not till I've given you some advice. Get rid of Denning. Send him back to wherever he came from, tomorrow. Make up your mind to stay here. Will needs you, kitten. He's a sick man. I wanted him to ask you to come out here, when he wrote that letter to you after Ellen died. But he wouldn't. Said you'd had enough trouble and grief. Maybe he was right. But you're here, and he's seen you. If you care two bits about him, you'll stick. He ain't got long to live. So get rid of Denning—pronto!"

The color drained out of Pam's cheeks, and a chill spread over her and a feeling of numbness. She was not aware that he had gone until she heard the door close. Then, stiffly, she sank down upon the edge of the bed. After a moment she twisted around with her face against the pillow.

"Oh, no!" she sobbed. "Oh, no! No!"

VI

FOR a long time Pamela huddled there before any reaction set in. Her father's appearance, the deep lines on his haggard face, the way his broad shoulders sagged, lent conviction to what her uncle had told her. He was ill and worried, and he needed her. Of course she'd stay. As a matter of fact, she had made up her mind to that the instant he'd taken her into his arms.

Nevertheless, as her mind began to function again, she wondered why Boyd Holden had come and almost begged her to stay. That he had done so did not not change her feeling of distrust, her instinctive dislike and suspicion of him. He'd also made a point of getting rid of Keith immediately.

She was puzzling over this, and trying to clarify that vague but peculiarly disturbing memory of him that belonged to the period just preceding her parents' separation, when the sound of horses drew her to the window. Five men were riding into the ranch yard, pulling rein near the corrals. She had to stand at the side of the window and peer out at an angle to see them dismount.

They were cowboys, of course, and she wondered if any of them had been long enough at the ranch for her to remember them. They wore slickers and moved stiffly as if cold, which made her think of the vast difference between the romantic notions of her girl friends in the East and the harsh realities of ranch life. Then Tod Butler came into view and she noted the light and easy way he moved, and felt a slight stirring of her interest.

"There's another man who's different," she murmured. "He's much too good-looking—and how well he knows it! I'll have to ask Dad about him."

Butler and one of the cowboys moved a little apart from the other four, who began stripping the gear off their horses. Then, as she was about to turn away, Keith Denning strolled past the window toward the group of men and horses. He, too, moved with the smooth and effortless ease of a giant cat, a tall, wide-shouldered, loose-muscled man at the sight of whom her heart gave a queer leap. Then, suddenly, her heart was lodged tightly in her throat, choking off her breath.

It was all over in a second or two at most. At one moment Tod Butler stood with his back toward the house, talking to a short bow-legged cowboy. At the next he was facing the approaching Denning, long legs well apart, elbows slightly bent. The other five men snapped to attention like soldiers responding to a command. Then Butler's left hand made a slight gesture, the angle went out of his elbows, and everything was normal again. Denning moved on without even the slightest hint of hesitation and halted near Tod and the bow-legged man. The other four went back to their unsaddling.

Pam began to breathe again. Exactly what, she wondered irritably, had she thought might happen? She mustn't allow herself to get spooked, as the cowboys would say. She slipped out of her robe and set to work again, combing out her heavy dark red hair. A few moments later, she heard the sound of a car and looked out again as Keith drove past the window.

Four of the cowboys had disappeared, but Tod Butler and the short, bow-legged puncher stood by while Denning backed his car into an empty shed. When he joined them, they all stood looking at the car and for the first time Pam noticed that the left front fender was badly dented.

"That was close!" she thought, and wondered how Keith would explain the damaged fender.

Denning was saying down below, "The way I drive a car I need to find a country where they grow rubber boulders, and teach their trees, fence posts and telegraph poles to duck."

"You did a good job of backing into the shed," Tod Butler observed in his soft, purring voice.

"Maybe you should drive backwards instead of forwards," commented the bow-legged man, who had a cast in his right eye and a cynically twisted mouth. "That's a sad looking fender. Scratched up the body some, too, didn't you?"

"Looks like barbed-wire," Butler remarked thoughtfully. "Thought you said you got here without no trouble."

"It's never no trouble to chase a boulder into a ditch," Denning drawled. "My trouble is missing 'em."

THE little man with the bad eye snorted and limped off toward the bunkhouse where the other four men had already gone. Denning's glance followed him. Like Butler, this fellow also packed two guns, and Tod had called him Cole. The other four remained nameless. They had stiffened up mighty quick at the sight of Keith, and he'd remarked the lack of any of the usual banter among them as they unsaddled.

"The old man is sick," he thought. "He's got two gunslicks riding for him, and a spooked crew. He's also got a brother that will bear watching. I wish Pam had stayed away from here."

He was on edge. From the first sight of the ranch buildings he'd had a feeling about the place. It was in the air, tension, brooding threat.

Cole disappeared inside the bunkhouse, and Keith's glance shifted slowly over the other buildings, wondering exactly what gave him that queer feeling. This was a real ranch, a prosperous ranch by every appearance. Had Tom Carter ever seen it?

"How does an expert go about putting a price on a ranch?"

Butler's gentle voice was mildly sarcastic. The glance of his hard blue eyes was level, but there was an opaqueness about the eyes themselves. Killer's eyes, Denning thought, and wondered again how such a man happened to be Will Holden's range boss. There was a closer kinship and, he suspected, a closer understanding between Boyd and Tod than between Tod and Pam's father. This was part of the queerness about the layout.

"They say an expert is just an ordinary damn fool a long way from home," Keith murmured, moving closer to the gear shed to gain its protection from the raw wind. "Maybe I can qualify that way. But don't rub it in, Butler. Back home, I'm only a cowboy lucky enough to own a fair to middling spread."

"Home being Texas, you said."

Butler also moved in closer to the shed and they stood there facing each other with the antagonism between them an almost physical thing.

"There've been Dennings in Texas," Keithe drawled, "since Old Sam Houston went to war with Santa Ana."

Butler considered this and the rolling of a cigarette. "Being an expert," he observed, striking a match and cup-

ping the flame in the palm of his left hand, "I judge you do considerable traveling."

"I've looked over a few hills."

"Ever been up in Wyoming?"

A knot jerked tight inside of Keith, but his blunt featured face showed nothing. "Pretty cold up there for a Texas man."

"So I've heard." Butler's soft voice had suddenly gone flat. "Get's cold around here, too, winters. This has been a late spring, but I reckon it ought to be all right for you to look the range over in a day or so."

Only then did Keith become aware of the man who had come up quietly behind him as he stood with his back toward the ranchhouse. Boyd Holden met his swift glance with a faintly sardonic smile which added nothing to his peace of mind. Not only had he allowed this big man, who stepped lightly even for a much smaller man, to approach him unnoticed, he had betrayed that he was startled.

"Getting acquainted, are you?" the big man rumbled. "Learn any business secrets, Tod?"

"He's plumb cagy," Butler replied. "Reckon I'll have to trail around with him to find out how he does his expertting." He smiled thinly.

Boyd chuckled. "I'm afraid you're out of luck. I've been talking to my niece," he went on, looking steadily at Keith. "She's given up her idea of selling. You've had your trip out here for nothing."

Denning thought swiftly. Pam had agreed to stall along for a few days before committing herself one way or the other. She knew that he needed time to look around, and an excuse for being at the ranch. He didn't think she'd let him down. Holden must be lying.

"Well," he murmured, shrugging, "that's the way it goes. Folks change their minds. Might stick around for a day or two anyhow, though, if you don't mind. This is the first time I've been on this range."

The other men exchanged swift glances. Then Boyd Holden nodded. "Fair enough. Want to take a look at our buildings and corrals? Then we'll go inside and have a drink before supper. There's just about time. Join us, Tod?"

"No, thanks," Butler said softly. "Got some washing up to do."

He wheeled and walked away in that light and easy way he had. The big man grinned at Keith. "Bet you he puts on a high polish. Pam is a mighty pretty girl."

SOMETHING cold seemed to hit Denning in the pit of the stomach. An idea he didn't like began to shape up in his mind. He managed to smile and make an appropriately disinterested reply as he turned beside the big man and they began a tour of inspection.

This took a little time. He was more than puzzled at Boyd Holden's insistence that he go inside each building and explore it thoroughly. It was as if Boyd Holden wanted to convince him that no skeletons or dead bodies were hidden at the B C H.

"That does it," Boyd rumbled at last. "Now we'll have that drink. What do you think of the layout, Denning?"

"It's as fine as any I've ever seen," Keith replied truthfully.

They walked across the yard toward the big adobe house in the early dusk. Overhead the sky was a mass of clouds, and the strong wind thrust against them, and the moaning of the pines on the slopes of the foothills was a weird and lonely sound. Lighted windows were pale yellow blurs in the murky twilight.

"By the way," the big man said, "Pam told me that you met through a mutual friend. But I didn't catch the name."

It was time, Denning thought, to do a little backfiring. "Did she tell you about the two killings in Topok last night?" he asked. "Seems somebody slugged the station agent before the

Limited got in, which was why the depot was dark. Marshal Porter was checking up on it this morning. Later on he told us that another man had been found with a bullet in him. He was plumb riled at having a crime wave on his hands."

"He would be," Boyd growled. "Night man at the station would be Wade. Who was the other one?"

"Let's see. Spears, I think, was what Porter called him. Gabe Spears. Know him?"

Boyd's answer was a noncommittal grunt. But the backfire had served its purpose—they had reached the house.

In the living room they found Will Holden standing with his back to the fire that roared up the chimney of the huge stone fireplace. Pam was curled up in a big armchair close by; and at the sight of her Denning's heart stopped for an instant.

She wore a simple frock of some soft, dark-green material, cut low to display her slender throat and the beginning swell of her breasts. Her dark red hair was piled high on her head, and she was the loveliest thing he had ever seen in his life. When her eyes met his, he saw the swift rise of color in her cheeks and his pulses throbbed from the eagerness that strained through him.

"Looks a heap like Ellen, doesn't she, Will?" Boyd rumbled. "Only I reckon she's even prettier."

"No woman could be prettier than Ellen was," Will Holden said in his deep, slow voice. "Not even her daughter."

In that moment the air in that big room seemed to become vibrant with suppressed hostility, as if in the quiet rumbling of their voices the two big men had brought to life a long quiescent conflict that was grim and deadly. A conflict, Denning sensed, which somehow had welded between them a bond that was stronger even than their kinship, a poisonous and destructive thing. He knew suddenly why Will Holden had not wanted Pamela to come home to the ranch. "I'm glad you said that, Dad," the girl said quietly. "I'm glad you—"

"I brought Denning in for a drink," Boyd Holden growled. "Go right ahead being glad, kitten, but don't hold up important business. What'll it be, Denning?" Will takes sherry. I'm a whisky man myself and can recommend the Bourbon."

He was heavily jovial, but his rudeness irked Denning, who glanced at Pam.

The girl spoke softly in a voice like ice dripping into a silver bowl.

"Thank you for interrupting me, Uncle Boyd. I'll be glad to have a glass of Dad's sherry. And I'll be even gladder when you stop forgetting my name."

Boyd grunted and looked at Denning, who disappointed him by saying that he'd have sherry, too. Pam smiled serenely, so cool and lovely that Keith hardly dared look at her. A soft-footed Chinese house boy brought the drinks, and presently called them to supper.

VII

SUPPER was served in the cookhouse gallery where, in true Western fashion crew, guests and owners all sat down together at a single long table. Tod Butler was on hand, resplendent in a blue silk shirt and crimson scarf, with his blond hair slicked down and his handsome face freshly shaven, shining with soap and smelling of bay rum. He managed somehow to sit beside Pam, with Denning across the table from the girl, and Will and Boyd Holden at the opposite ends.

It was an excellent meal, to which Keith did full justice in spite of the circumstances, not the least disturbing of which was the way Tod Butler played up to Pam, and the way the girl seemed to enjoy it.

Will Holden had little to say, and merely toyed with his food. Boyd ate hugely, and seemed to be vastly amused at Tod's attention to his niece. The cowboys were a silent lot, who bolted their

food, each man leaving the table as soon as he had finished eating.

When the meal was over Denning, to his surprise, found himself walking back to the living room beside Pam. Will and Boyd were ahead of them, and Tod Butler had disappeared without explanation. The girl touched his arm, walking slowly, so that her father and uncle entered the big room some distance ahead of them.

"Keith," she said softly, "something happened this afternoon. There isn't time to tell you about it now. But after it happened, I went to Dad and told him a few things. He's going to talk to us this evening—privately."

So she had broken her word, he thought, and didn't like it. But if the damage was done, it was done. He didn't say anything. Her fingers tightened on his arm, stopping him, and she stood close to him with the warmth and sweetness of her pressing against him, starting a quivering deep inside of him.

"We've got to trust each other, Keith," she murmured.

Her free hand lay lightly against his chest and her lovely face was a pale blur in the near darkness of the gallery. Then suddenly his arms were around her and she was clinging to him, reaching up to meet his kiss.

The soft scuff of a foot behind them broke the spell. They moved apart swiftly as Tod Butler came toward them.

Denning had never been so unsure of anything as he was of himself in that moment. Not only was he badly shaken by the impulse that had mastered him so unexpectedly, and by Pam's even more surprising response, but the last thing he'd wanted was for Tod Butler or Boyd Holden to discover that the relationship between the girl and himself was not strictly a business relationship. The idea that had begun to take shape in his mind out in the yard before supper made such a discovery highly dangerous. But the handsome gunslick gave no indication that he had seen anything out of the ordinary, or that it meant anything to him if he had. He joined them and they went on into the living room.

"It's been a long time since that piano's had a work-out, Miss Pam," Tod said in his gentle voice, gesturing toward the old-fashioned grand piano. "Won't you play something?"

Will Holden had resumed his place with his back to the fire and was carefully stoking his pipe. His brother was looking over the bottles in the liquor cabinet. Everything seemed normal and ordinary—the after-supper gathering of friendly people in a room designed and furnished for comfortable living.

"Go ahead, kitten," Boyd rumbled. "Tod ain't a bad hand at singing. Let's have some music. How about some brandy, Denning? Join us, Will?"

"I'll just have my pipe," Will replied, his voice like an echo of his brother's. "Some of your mother's music is there, Pamela. I'd like to hear those old ballads again."

Boyd glanced around with that sardonic smile of his, and Denning instinctively stiffened, but the big man withheld the comment he apparently had been about to make. Pam smiled at her father, and her eyes touched Denning with a soft and radiant shyness in them as she turned and went to the piano which Butler was opening.

There followed an interlude that was forever memorable to Keith. Without affectation, Pam played and sang for them in a high, clear voice of remarkable sweetness that laid a spell upon him. She seemed to be singing just for him, even when Tod Butler added a passable tenor to the choruses of some of the old ballads.

But Tod remained silent, an almost rapt expression on his handsome face, while she sang "Love's Old Sweet Song" and "Mavourneen." And then, at the last, she sang "Forgotten." As the last sweet note died away into the flutter of the flames in the fireplace, she sat with her hands in her lap and her head tilted forward, and the stillness in the big

room was like no other stillness had ever been.

KEITH dared not look at her. But suddenly he found himself looking at Tod Butler, meeting the hard challenge of the man's cold eyes. Baleful eyes they were, opaque and unblinking. Keith's roots stirred and a tingling ran along his spine, and the palms of his hands prickled. Then the silence was broken and the spell ended in the rumble of Boyd Holden's deep voice.

"Sob stuff, but pretty. You've got a sweet voice, kitten. Does better then Ellen did, don't you think, Will? That was one of Ellen's favorite songs, too. Remember how she used to sing for us, before—"

A queer choked sound came from Will Holden's throat, half-sob, half-moan. It lifted Pam to her feet and sent her swiftly to the white-haired man who stood before the fireplace with a stricken look upon his lined and haggard face. And Will Holden took a single lurching step and his knees seemed to give way and his big frame sagged, even as the girl reached him. Her slim arms went about him, supporting him, and he braced himself with a visible effort.

Keith, in the act of leaping to lend a hand, checked himself. He saw a glance flash between Butler and Boyd. Then the gunslick's cold eyes were upon him again, and Boyd Holden spoke gruffly.

"Better take a shot of that medicine you carry around with you, Will. By the Lord, if you are my own brother, you're a prime fool to let yourself get upset over a dead woman! Specially one who thought so little of you when she was alive that she walked out and left you flat."

It was so callously brutal that Denning could hardly believe his ears. Pam twisted around, her green eyes blazing in her white, shocked face.

"What a hateful thing to say! You—you—"

The sardonic smile on Boyd's broad face seemed to infuriate her. She was a red-topped flame, leaping at him, striking at him. Her small hand caught him across the jaw with a solid smack that rocked his head. Nor was he quick enough to catch her as she swayed back. Then Will Holden hooked a big arm about her and the two big men faced each other, and again the only sound in the room was the fluttering of the flames in the fireplace.

And suddenly again the air seemed to vibrate with that grim and deadly feeling, stronger than hate, that ran between the brothers. It was a strange and terrible thing, beyond Denning's power even then to understand. But it sharpened his awareness of Tod Butler, who stood near the piano still, a thin, expectant smile on his face.

"You had that coming, Boyd," Will Holden said quietly, after a moment. "You've been at it a long time, haven't you? I'm just beginning to understand how long, and what you've done!"

Keith could only guess at the meaning of this, but it made him acutely uncomfortable, like an interloper to whom a family skeleton had been unintentionally disclosed. Yet he sensed that it was important, that it had a direct bearing upon Tom Carter's disappearance, and upon the attempt to kill Pam before she reached the ranch.

"So!" Boyd Holden grunted. "Well, don't let your understanding—whatever you mean by that—bring on another heart attack." He flicked another glance at Butler, then peered down at Pam, who stared back at him with her chin up and her head pressed back against her father's shoulder. "You'd better put a curb on that temper, kitten, else it'll get you into trouble. Too bad there wasn't a man around to take a hand in your upbringin'. But maybe it ain't too late, yet."

"If you have any idea of trying," Pam retorted instantly, "you'd better get rid of it. You may be my uncle, but if you ever lay a hand on me, or enter my room again uninvited, I'll make you wish you hadn't!"

"So!" Boyd grunted again, and turned on his heel and went out of the room.

Butler closed the piano and looked questioningly at Keith, who looked back at him without expression. Pam turned within her father's arm, put one of her arms about his waist and murmured something under her breath.

"Good night, Tod," Will Holden said in his deep, rumbling voice. "Denning, I'd like to talk to you, if you aren't in a hurry to turn in."

"No hurry, sir," Keith murmured, noting with approval the flush that stained Butler's face at his curt dismissal.

But there was nothing, of course, that the gunslick could do. He said good night politely to Pam, tipped his head at Denning and went away. His boot heels clicked along the gallery's tiled floor until a door closed on the sound.

"Keith!" Pam cried sharply. "Help me!"

HIS LEAP was in time to catch Will Holden's sagging form. Between them, they managed to get the big man into a chair, where he slumped down, gasping for breath, his face the color of bread dough.

"Breast—pocket," he choked.

Pam's fingers were swift. She seemed to know exactly what to do. From a small cardboard box with a label on it, she took an ampule, broke it into her own handkerchief and held it near her father's nose. It seemed to Denning, who knew little of such things, that the effect was like magic. In a few minutes Holden was breathing fairly easily and the color was coming back into his face. Pam knelt beside him anxiously. Keith went across the room, looked out into the gallery, and closed the door.

When he came back the girl was perched on the arm of her father's chair, her cheek against his thinking white hair, one of her small hands in Holden's gnarled fist.

"Hadn't you better turn in, sir?" Keith asked gently. "We can do our talking in the morning."

Will Holden shook his head. "It had better be tonight," he said. "I'll be all right now. I've had these spells on and off for several years. Never knew exactly why I kept fighting them, but I do now."

He rubbed the back of Pam's hand against his cheek. Keith turned abruptly and brought a chair from across the room. When he sat down in it he dared again to glance at Pam, and was surprised to see how well she had herself under control.

"You didn't like it when you thought I'd broken my word," she said quietly, "But I had to tell Dad part of the story. I told him what happened in town last night and on the road today. And I told him about Uncle Boyd coming to my room. But I didn't tell him who you really are, Keith."

Suddenly, then, her cheeks were crimson and her eyes were shy and a feeling of warmth and gladness spread through him swiftly.

"Perhaps you told me more than you realized, child," Will Holden said, with a slight smile. "At any rate, Denning, she made who and what you are important. What happened here a few minutes ago increases that importance."

VIII

HOLDEN'S frost-gray eyes were keen and shrewd in spite of his obvious illness. They were honest eyes, the eyes of a father appraising a man in whom his daughter has evidenced great interest, the eyes of a man seeking another, younger man to carry on an unfinished job of vast importance.

"You know my name, sir," Keith said quietly. "What you don't know is that I'm Tom Carter's partner and that I came to Topok to find him."

"To find him!" Holden echoed. "Why come here to find him? When he wrote me about wanting to sell his interest, I invited him to come and talk it over, and that was the last I heard from him.

Thought he'd changed his mind."

"He didn't" Keith said grimly. "He answered your letter, told you when to expect him. He registered at the Topok Hotel on February tenth. My letters came back unclaimed."

The significance of it sank into the older man slowly. Surprise gave way to conviction. He sagged back in his chair, closing his eyes, and Keith glanced swiftly at Pam who slipped down on her knees and peered anxiously at her father. "Dad! Please!"

"I'm all right, child." He looked again at Denning then, and Keith saw the fear in his eyes. "It's worse than I thought," he said heavily. "Much worse. For what I've done in my blind stubbornness, I'm willing to pay—I have paid! But it's got to stop there. Pam"—he turned to the girl and laid his big hand on her red head gently—"I was afraid to have you come here, even when I knew only part of what I know now. But you came and now, somehow, we must get you out of here safely."

"I'll never leave you, Dad!" the girl exclaimed. "Never!"

Will Holden might not have heard. He looked at Denning.

"We'd best not wait even until morning. Will you drive my girl back to Topok tonight? Drive her back where she'll be safe, then get in touch with the sheriff and have him bring a posse out here as soon as the Lord will let him!"

"I won't go!" Pam cried. "I won't leave you here alone!"

Will Holden smiled a strange smile. "I'll be safe enough, child. As long as you're alive and out of reach, my scheming brother has nothing to gain from my death. If you've read your grandfathers' wills and the partnership agreement, you'll understand."

Denning did understand. If Will Holden survived both his daughter and Tom Carter, the ranch in its entirety would be his and would pass, at his death, to his brother, as nearest of kin. This meant that as long as Pam lived and was safely out of reach, it would be highly important for Boyd Holden to keep his brother alive.

"I shouldn't have brought you out here, Pam," Keith said.

"If you hadn't," she retorted, "I'd have found some other way."

He smiled wryly. That was exactly what had made him yield to her insistence. He'd gambled on his ability to protect her if she came with him.

"You'd better get started at once," Will Holden said impatiently. "Go get ready, Pam. Put on your warmest clothes and heavy shoes. Then slip out quietly and walk down the road. We'll give her ten minutes, Denning. Then go out and start your car. If anyone has anything to say, tell them Pam has decided not to sell, and that you're going back to Texas."

Denning doubted it would be as easy as that. He rubbed his chin with the side of his left thumb as he got slowly to his feet. Pam stood up slowly, too, plainly not wanting to leave her father.

"How about the crew, sir?" Keith asked. "Couldn't we depend on them?"

"Since the doctor told me to take things easy," the sick man broke in, "I've left too much to Boyd. There isn't a hand, except Butler and Cole, who's been here longer than three months. Those two will back Boyd's play. The others can't be counted on. The only thing is to get Pam out of here."

Pam gave Keith a troubled glance, but when he looked down into her strange green eyes there suddenly was something else in them that made his heart leap. Then she went past him, touching his arm lightly with her fingers, and out of the room. He harkened to the quick clicking of her heels along the gallery, and heard the quiet rumble of Will Holden's voice.

"It happens that way sometimes. Like a bolt of lightning out of a clear sky. If a man only has sense enough to grab onto it, and hold tight!"

Denning drew a deep breath of wonderment. "I aim to hold tight, sir," he promised.

"She's like her mother," the sick man went on gently. "But she's got the Holden temper, too, that'll take some managing. Get her out of this, son, and take care of her. Don't let anything ever come between you—not even your own brother, if you've got one."

"No, sir."

THIS, Keith thought, was the strangest of all the strange things that had happened since he had stepped off the train in Topok last night, less than twenty-four hours ago.

"A man pays for his follies," Will Holden went on, as if speaking to himself. "I've paid for mine. I rated my brother above my wife. Because we were blood kin, I thought it was my duty to make a man out of him when my own father gave it up as a bad job and disinherited him. Ellen didn't want me to bring him here, but I wouldn't listen to her. He made love to her, and I beat him with my fists until he got down on his knees and apologized. I should've run him out then, but I thought he meant it when he said he'd learned his lesson. So she left me and—" His head tipped forward on his chest. "We were too stubborn, and too proud," he mumbled. "Ellen—Ellen—"

His voice broke off and a sudden stab of fear stiffened Keith. But the old man's chest was rising and falling regularly. Keith went silently across the gallery entrance and looked out into the darkness, straining his ears. He saw nothing, but a subdued mumbling of voices came from somewhere to his right. He waited there until Pam came back, dressed in the clothes she had worn from town.

She kissed her father, and Denning went with her out the front door onto the porch, where he took her briefly into his arms. She clung to him and he kissed her gently.

"Then it's true?" she murmured, with her lips against his.

"Truer than true," he told her. "Now get along with you. I'll pick you up in about ten minutes and make love to you all the way to Topok!"

"Golly!" she whispered. "What a man! He makes love by the mile!"

Then she was gone, a slim shape vanishing into the darkness beneath the black sky.

Back inside Keith spoke briefly to Will Holden, who summoned the Chinese houseboy and instructed him to bring Boyd and Tod Butler to the living room. A few minutes later, carrying his suitcase and with his gun buckled on, Keith made his way quietly across the ranch yard to the shed where he'd backed his car.

There were no lights in the bunkhouse and the only sound was the moaning of the pines and the rushing sound of the wind. Wishing he had a flashlight, he fumbled his way along the side of the car to locate the door. He wondered grimly what would happen when he started it, hoped as grimly that it would start quickly. Then he found the door handle. As he twisted it, a blaze of light leaped up.

"Chasing boulders off the road in the dark is plumb dangerous, Mr. Denning," said the holder of the flashlight. "Tod was wondering if you'd get the notion to try it. . . ."

Pam walked quickly along the crown of the muddy road. The darkness was so intense that she could hardly see her hand before her face, and the moaning of the pines was an eerie sound. When she glanced over her shoulder, the lights in the ranchhouse did not look very far away, yet it seemed to her that she'd been walking for hours. Her boots were heavy with mud, her feet felt like cakes of ice, and if she gave them half a chance her teeth chattered. She stumbled over something she could not see and stepped squarely into a puddle that splashed water up over her legs.

"Darn!" she sputtered.

But she kept on walking for what seemed another hour, but probably was no more than five minutes. Then she stopped and again looked back. The

lights were farther away now. Far enough, perhaps. She strained her ears for the sound of Keith's car. Surely more than ten minutes had elapsed since she'd clung to him there on the porch.

It made her warm to think of that. It took her breath away to remember how he'd kissed her that first time, in the gallery after supper. She'd wanted him to, of course, but she hadn't counted on it being quite that way. No man had ever kissed her like that. Nor, she knew, had she ever responded to any man's kiss as she had to Keith's. It removed instantly every least doubt in her mind that he was her man, that she belonged to him irrevocably.

"Hurry, darling!" she whispered into the darkness. "Hurry! Don't let anything happen to you. I couldn't bear it!"

Suddenly she was afraid, there in the damp darkness with the moaning of the pines and the chill breath of the wind all around her. The man she loved and her father were back there. If anything should happen to either of them—

The lights of a car flashed up suddenly between her and the house. Her heart leaped and eagerness strained through her. She started to run toward the car, but remembered, and stopped and stood at the side of the road, waiting.

"All the way to Topok!" she thought. "All the way to Topok!"

A CAR came along at a moderate pace, while her impatience fretted. She began to walk toward it slowly. The lights picked her up and she stopped again. It was Keith's car all right. It was barely moving when it came abreast of her, and the door swung open. She made a quick step, reaching out for a handhold. A hand clamped around her wrist and the car stopped.

"Bad night for a walk, ain't it, Miss Pam?" asked a soft, purring voice. "Get in. I'll drive you back home."

"Tod Butler!"

She wrenched back violently, but he held fast to her wrist. She yanked and twisted desperately, but still he held her. Then he was out of the car, and she struck at the white blur of his face with her fist and kicked at his shins. He twisted both her arms behind her back and held her helpless.

"Gentling you will be a pleasure," he murmured. "Get in and behave yourself, else I'll hogtie you like a yearling heifer."

"What have you done to Keith?" she gasped. "And my father?"

"Keith first, eh?" he said softly. "Why, he ain't been hurt much—yet. Cole is riding herd on him till we get back. The old man's all right, too. His bum ticker is bearing up right well, considering. Reckon he'll be right glad to see you. Thinks a heap of you, seems like. Get into this car!"

She got into the car. There was nothing else for her to do. She got in and sat quietly beside him while be backed and turned and drove back along the muddy road.

It wasn't far when you weren't walking, but it was far enough to permit despair to take full possession of her. This silent man beside her was a killer; her uncle was worse than a killer; he'd broken up her parents' marriage, and he'd schemed and plotted through the years to accomplish what now was as good as done.

Butler drove around the house into the yard at the rear, where he stopped the car and opened the door for her politely.

"They'll be waiting for us in the living room," he said in his gentle voice.

She stepped out and looked about. The bunkhouse was unlighted. None of the crew seemed to be around, nor was there any sign of Keith and the man Tod Butler called Cole.

The big living room was almost as it had been earlier in the evening. The fire crackled and roared cheerfully in the big stone fireplace, before which now, however, Boyd Holden stood warming his back, while Will sat facing him in a big armchair. Denning occupied another

chair, to the right of the fireplace, back against the wall facing the length of the room. To his right, watching his every move, stood the bow-legged cowhand with the cast in his eye and the cynically twisted mouth. Another sullen-faced cowboy stood in the door that opened out onto the gallery. Keith's holster was empty, but he wasn't bound and he hadn't been hurt.

"If you're smart at all," Cole had told him out in the shed, "you won't argue. You'll lift that iron out of your holster and toss it over to me easy-like. If you don't, I'll sure as hell separate your ideas from your disposition—permanent!"

"I'm in no shape to put up an argument," Keith had had to admit. "But I'm curious. What's this all about? I came here to do a job for Miss Holden, but she's changed her mind so I'm pulling out for Texas."

"Couldn't think of lettin' you travel on a night like this," the bow-legged little gunslick replied. "Toss me that gun."

Keith might have taken a chance, but he knew it would be a losing one. So he lifted his gun carefully from its holster and tossed it onto the ground beneath the flashlight. Cole then ordered him to turn around and lift his hands, and marched him into the house. He and Will Holden had done their best to conceal the fact that Pam had left the house, hoping that she might somehow keep clear of the trap that had caught them, but Tod Butler had gone to her room to get her and Boyd Holden had been quick to figure out what had happened.

"Smart," he'd rumbled. "But not smart enough. What's your ante in this game, Denning?"

"My ante," he'd said, making it sound as if he was thoroughly disgusted, "is the five hundred bucks I was supposed to be paid for a job Miss Holden's changed her mind about. She said she'd pay me half of it if I'd drive her to Topok tonight."

"I think," Boyd had growled, "you're lying. But it doesn't matter. You're in this, my friend, too deep to get out."

Then Tod Butler had driven away.

IX

NOW Butler was back and Pam was coming along the gallery, stepping through the door, blinking her green eyes against the sudden light. Something seemed to tighten about Keith's heart at the sight of her, pale and scared and spattered with mud. She looked straight at him as her vision cleared, and a tinge of color came suddenly to her cheeks.

"Keith!"

That was all she said, but it was enough. It was, perhaps, too much. For as she darted from the door to her father's chair and knelt beside the sick man, Boyd Holden looked hard at Denning and then at Tod Butler. Butler's smile was a tight curling of the lips.

"I brought her back," he said. "Now let's get down to cases, Boyd."

There was an odd sound to that, it seemed to Denning. It wasn't the way a hired hand spoke to his boss. He leaned forward a little, started to rise to his feet.

"Relax!" Cole warned softly.

The little gunslick stood with his feet planted solidly, the bow of his legs exaggerated, a wicked smile on his cynical mouth. Keith relaxed.

"We'll get down to cases," Boyd Holden rumbled. "It's been a long time coming, but this is it."

Huge and powerful he stood there before the fire, his broad face a trifle flushed, the play of the flames behind him exaggerating his bulk, gleaming on the polished handles of the guns with which he'd armed himself.

"Twenty years," he went on. "I've waited twenty years. It's that long, Will, since you got the old goat to cut me out

of his will. It's that long since you married the woman who belonged to me!"

"You're lying, Boyd," the sick man broke in. "You were a no good scamp twenty years ago—a crooked gambler, a thief, and a woman chaser! That's why father washed his hands of you. As for Ellen—God help me, she was wiser than I! She knew I was wrong in thinking you'd go straight if I gave you a chance."

"Hold your jaw!" thundered Boyd. "I've took your mealy-mouthed talk too long. I've hated your guts all my life, damn you. You stole everything that was mine by rights, and now, by the Lord, you'll pay for it! You—and Ellen's brat!"

"I've already paid more than you know," Will Holden said sternly. "I'm ready to die. But if you've got a brain in your head, you'll not molest this child. She's known to be here. She'll be looked for. You can't get away with killing her—as you did Tom Carter!"

Denning heard this, but he was watching Tod Butler. There was a thin smile on the gunslick's handsome face, a smile of contempt and rising impatience, a dangerous smile.

"We're wasting time," Butler broke in now in his gentle voice. "You two beller at each other like a pair of old wind-broke bull buffalos. Get down to cases, Boyd. Never mind about how you hate the old gent's guts. Never mind about Tom Carter."

"Yes," rumbled Will Holden, "get down to cases. It looks to me as if you had the bear by the tail. There's no profit in wholesale murder. The law is sure to move in."

"Maybe this Denning is the law," squint-eyed Cole suggested. "I'm right curious about him, Tod."

"He ain't the law," Butler said softly. "He's Carter's pardner. I got curious a while ago and checked up on him. His name was in Carter's wallet, to be notified in case anything happened to Car-

[Turn page]

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GIVE!

ter. I never did get around to it!"

His mocking glance touched Denning, and returned immediately to the big man who stood before the crackling fire. A choked cry of horror came from Pam as she swayed to her feet beside her father's chair. Keith did not look at her. He watched Butler. He had found his partner's killer, but unless something like a miracle happened it would do him no good. He stood up slowly, disregarding Cole's warning mutter.

"Get on with it, Boyd," the handsome killer urged. "We're wasting time."

"You've wasted your share of it," growled Boyd. Then he stared down at his brother and went on. "You're wrong about me having the bear by the tail. I'm not that dumb. Tod and his boys are pulling out. They've been well paid and they've got a hideout where they won't be found. The girl goes with them. She was slated to die, but Denning messed that up, and after Tod got a look at her he wanted her. He'll take her and do what he likes with her. But there'll be proof to satisfy the law that she died in an accident—she and Denning—before they ever reached the B C H."

HE SPOKE with gruff confidence that left no room for doubt as to the completeness of his plans. Denning dared not look at Pam, and the girl uttered no sound. Boyd Holden's rumbling voice became a snarl.

"There'll be proof that she died before you, damn you, Will! And I'll watch you choke and gasp and turn purple. I'll watch you die slow and hard, with none of that doctor's drug to help! By the Lord, I'll enjoy that!"

The deep voice ended. For a moment it seemed that the horrible hatred of the one brother for the other laid a kind of spell upon all who heard. No one moved. The only sound was the crackling roar of the fire. Then, suddenly, Pam was a streak of lancing flame, springing away from her father's side. Her red head struck Boyd Holden squarely in the stomach, knocking him backward, doubled up and grunting. Her small hand snatched at the grip of one of his guns even as Tod Butler, moving with almost equal speed, caught her from behind.

So much Denning saw as he wheeled and leaped and drove his fist at the point of Cole's jaw. The blow landed solidly. It lifted the bow-legged little killer off his feet, knocked him backward against the wall. Keith followed through with surging fury. A gun boomed behind him as he landed on the squint-eyed man's unconscious form.

A bullet bored into the adobe wall above his head. His clawing hand ripped his own gun from Cole's belt. He rolled off to the left, came clear around as a man at the gallery door fired again. The slug tore through his hair. His answering shot caught the man just above the belt buckle.

"Keith!"

Pam's scream lifted above the thunder of the guns. His head jerked around and again instinctively he flung himself sideward. Flame streaked across his upper left arm. Across the room Tod Butler struck the girl a back-handed blow and leaped clear of her, landing crouched with a gun in each hand.

The gun in Keith's hand jumped twice. A hot breath fanned his cheek. The thud of a heavy body striking the floor came as an echo of the shots, but the handsome gunslick stood for a moment as if frozen. Then the guns dropped from his outstretched hands and he toppled slowly forward and fell across them.

Before the killer's body struck the floor, Keith was on his feet, wheeling alertly toward the fireplace. What he saw there froze him in turn. Will Holden gripped a heavy iron poker in his hand and stood staring down at the sprawling bulk of his brother. . . .

Half an hour later, Keith stood alone on the porch, smoking a cigarette and watching the moonlight break through

the scattering clouds. The wind was still blowing, but less strongly, and there was a scent of pine in the air and a stillness. The storm, he thought, was over.

"Both storms," he muttered. "But it sure looked bad for a while."

He shook his head, remembering how bad it had looked. And then his ear caught the sound of light footsteps in the living room, and a quivering started deep inside him. He snapped his cigarette away and as the sparks scattered and died, Pam was beside him.

"He's asleep," she said, in her clear sweet voice. "It's like a miracle. He says he's changed his mind about dying. He's going to live until—" She stopped abruptly with a soft catching of her breath. Then she asked, "The other men made no trouble?"

"None whatever. They seemed glad the way it turned out. They're really cowhands—all but Cole and the one I shot. Cole talked some, too. Said the men who tried to stop us on our way out were Gabe Spears' men, hired to do the dirty work. He and Butler had known Spears for some years."

"Why was Spears killed?" the girl asked.

"Because he botched the job of train shoving he was supposed to do. Seems Boyd couldn't stand for a man to fall down on a job."

"Then Boyd—killed him?"

He hadn't wanted to tell her this, but she was bound to find it out sooner or later so perhaps it was just as well to get it over with.

"Boyd killed him," he said quietly. "But Butler killed Tom Carter."

A little moment of silence built up around them. She wasn't touching him, yet he could feel the warmth of her nearness and the quivering down inside of him was making it hard for him to breathe.

"My—uncle isn't—dead, is he?" she asked presently.

"No. I fixed up the cut on his head and left him tied to his bed, with Ling Wu riding herd on him."

IT WOULD have been better in some ways, he thought, if Boyd had been killed. But when she murmured that she was glad, he understood that, too. It was an ugly business all around, but she wouldn't want to remember that her father had killed his own brother.

Another moment of silence enveloped them. The moon sailed out into a wide patch of cloudless sky, transforming the bleak range and grim mountains into a kind of fairyland.

"We'd have had moonlight on our way to town," Pam said softly. "Not all the way, but part of the way to Topok."

Without knowing how it happened she was in his arms.

"Golly!" she murmured after a long while, looking up at him with her slim arms about his neck. "It took you a long time, darling. I was afraid you'd changed your mind."

"Never!" he vowed, and kissed the soft hollow of her throat.

Her hand was soft and cool against his cheek. She laughed softly and snuggled her head against his shoulder.

"Do you know what Dad said when I kissed him good night? He said he was going to live to—to hold his grandchildren on his knee!" And then she whispered, "I'm shameless! Why, Mr. Denning, I've only known you twenty-four hours!"

There was only one way for him to answer that.

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By LOUIS L'AMOUR

As the gun came into Jim Bostwick's hand, Moffit sprang out into the open

MEN TO

Jim Bostwick looked like another sitting duck to this hired killer who had no conscience. The trouble was, Jim didn't sit long in one place

MATCH THE HILLS

CAP MOFFIT was a careful man. That he was forty-two years old and still alive proved that beyond doubt, for Cap Moffit was a professional killer.

He had learned the lesson of care from his first professional killing. In that case —and he had been fifteen years younger— Cap had picked a fight with his victim and shot him down and been nearly lynched as a result.

From that day on, Cap Moffit planned every killing as painstakingly as a great general might plan a battle. And he no longer made mistakes, knowing he need make but one. Over the years he had developed a technique, a carefully worked out pattern of operation.

He rode into the country over back trails, located the man he was to kill, and then spied upon him from cover until all his habits were known. Then, and only then, did Cap Moffit move in for the kill.

He always waited until his man was alone. He always caught him without cover in case the first shot was not a kill. He waited until his man was on the ground so that a startled horse could not carry off a wounded man, or deliver the body too soon among friends. And also because it made that first shot more certain.

He never approached the body after a man fell, always went immediately away. And so far he had never failed.

Slightly below medium height, he was of slender build, and his face was narrow and quiet, with pale blue eyes and a tight, thin-lipped mouth. He invariably wore a narrow-brimmed gray hat, scuffed and solid, a gray vest over a blue cotton shirt, and faded jeans outside of boots with run-down heels. His gray coat was usually tied over his bed roll behind his saddle.

Cap Moffit lay comfortably on his stomach in a slight depression in the partial shade of the pines that crested Elk Ridge. Below him, in the long green valley, was the T U Ranch, and living alone on that ranch was the man he was to kill. He was a man unknown to Moffit, although Cap knew his name was Jim Bostwick.

"Don't figure him for an easy one," his employer had warned. "The man's no gunfighter, but he gives me the impression that he's been around. He's tough, and he won't scare at all. We tried that."

THE advice bored Cap. It mattered not at all who or what Jim Bostwick was. He would have no chance to show himself as wise or tough. Once the situation was known, Cap Moffit would kill him, and that would be that. Of this, Cap Moffit had been sure.

Now, after five days of watching the ranch, he was no longer so positive. Men, he had discovered, were creatures of habit. All the little practices of living sooner or later fell into a pattern, and once that pattern was known it was comparatively easy to find a point at which a man was usually motionless and within range.

For the first three days Jim Bostwick had come from the house at five-thirty in the morning and fed his horse a bait of oats and corn. He curried the horse while it finished the grain. Not many men took the time to care for a horse so thoroughly. That completed, he brought a wooden bucket from the house and, walking to the spring which was forty steps from the door, he filled the bucket and returned. Only then did he prepare breakfast.

By the second day Cap Moffit had decided that if the practice continued the

place for the killing was at the corral while Bostwick was currying the horse. The pole corral offered no cover, the man was practically motionless, and there was good cover for Moffit within forty yards. If the first shot failed there was time to empty the gun before Bostwick could reach shelter. And Cap Moffit had never missed once since he had entered his present profession. He did not dare miss.

Moreover, the spot he had selected for himself offered easy access and retreat over low ground, so he could not be seen reaching his objective. On the third day the pattern was repeated and Cap Moffit decided if it held true one more day he would act.

He had taken every care to conceal his own presence. His camp was six miles away and carefully hidden. He never used the same vantage point on two successive days. He kept his field-glasses shaded so their glass would not reflect light.

Yet, despite all his care he had given himself away, and now the hunter was also the hunted.

On the morning of the fourth day Jim Bostwick came from the house before Cap Moffit was settled into shooting position. Instead of going to the corral, he went around the house and disappeared from sight behind it. Puzzled by the sudden change, Cap waited, sure the frame of habit would prove too strong and that the man would return to his usual ways. Suddenly, his eyes caught a movement at the corral and he was startled to see the horse eating from a bucket. Now, what the hell!

Jim Bostwick was nowhere in sight.

Then suddenly he appeared, coming from the spring with a bucket of fresh water. At the corner of the cabin he stopped and shaded his eyes, looking up the trail. Was he expecting visitors?

Bostwick disappeared within the house, and smoke began to climb from the chimney. Cap Moffit lit a cigarette and tried to puzzle it out. If Bostwick followed his usual pattern now he would devote more than an hour to eating and cleaning up afterward. But why had he gone around the house? How had he reached the corral without being seen? And the spring? Could he possibly be aware that he was being watched?

Moffit dismissed that possibility. No chance of it, none at all. He had given no indication of his presence.

Nevertheless, men do not change a habit pattern lightly, and something had changed that of Bostwick, at least for a few minutes. And why had he looked so carefully up the trail? Was he expecting someone?

No matter. Moffit would kill Bostwick, and he would not wait much longer. Just to see if anyone did come.

MOFFIT was rubbing out his first cigarette of the day when his eye caught a flicker of movement. A big man, even bigger than Bostwick, was standing on the edge of the brush. He carried a rifle, and he moved toward the house. The fellow wore a buckskin shirt, had massive chest and shoulders, and walked with a curious, sidelong limp. At the door he suddenly ducked inside. Faintly, Moffit heard a rumble of voices, but he was too far away to hear anything that was said.

He scowled irritably. Who was the man in the buckskin shirt? What did *he* want?

Had he only known it, there was only one man in the cabin. That man was Bostwick himself. Stripping off the buckskin shirt he removed the other shirts and padding he had worn under it and threw the worn-out hat to a hook. He was a big, tough man, to whom life had given much in trouble and hard work. He had come here to hold down this ranch for a friend until that friend could get back to make his own fight for it, a friend whose wife was fighting for her life now, and for the life of their child.

Jim Bostwick knew Charley Gore wanted this ranch and that he would stop at nothing to get it. They had tried to scare him first, but that hadn't worked. Gore had tried to ride him into a fight in town, when Gore was surrounded by his boys, and Bostwick had refused it. Knowing the game as he did, and knowing

Gore, Bostwick had known this would not be the end of it.

Naturally wary, he had returned to the ranch, and days had gone by quietly. Yet he remained alert. And then one morning as he had started for the corral, he had caught a flash of something out of the corner of his eyes. He had not stopped nor turned his head, but when he was currying the horse he got a chance to study the rim of Elk Ridge without seeming to.

What he had seen was simple enough. A bird had started to light in a tree, then had flown up and away. Something was in that tree or was moving on the ground under it.

It could have been any one of many things.

Cap Moffit was a student of men and their habits. In the case of Jim Bostwick he had studied well, but not well enough. In the first place he had not guessed that Bostwick had a habit of suspicion, and that he also had a habit of liking to walk in the dark.

It was simply that he liked the cool of night, the stars, the stillness of it. He had walked at night after supper ever since he was a boy. And so it was that the night after the bird had flown up Jim Bostwick, wearing moccasins for comfort, took a walk. Only that night he went further afield.

He had been walking west of the ranch when he smelled dust. There was no mistaking it. He paused, listening, and heard the faint sound of hoof beats dwindling away into distance.

At the point where he now stood was the junction between two little used trails, and the hoof beats had sounded heading south down the Snow Creek trail. But where could the rider have come from? The only place, other than the ranch, would be high on Elk Ridge itself.

Puzzled, Jim Bostwick made his way back to the ranch. If this rider had been on Elk Ridge that morning, and had caused that bird to fly up, he must have spent the day there. What he was doing there was obvious. He had been watching the ranch. Yet, Bostwick thought he could have been mistaken about the bird. A snake or a mountain lion might have caused it to fly up. Yet he doubted it.

The following morning, an hour before day, he was not in the cabin. He was lying among the rocks above Snow Creek trail several miles from the ranch, his horse hidden well back in the brush. He did not see the rider, for the man kept off the trail in the daylight, but he heard him. Heard him cough, heard his horse's hoof strike stone, and knew from the sound that the rider had gone up through the trees to Elk Ridge.

WHEN the rider was safely out of the way, Jim Bostwick went out and studied the tracks. Then he returned to the horse he had been riding and started back for the ranch, but he circled wide until he could ride down into the arroyo that skirted the north side of the ranch. This arroyo was narrow and invisible from the top of the ridge. In a grassy spot near the ranchhouse he turned the horse into a small corral there. It was where Tom Utterback kept his extra riding stock.

Then he crept back to the ranchhouse and went about his chores in the usual way, careful to indicate no interest in the ridge. He was also careful not to stand still where he would long be visible.

Inside the house, he prepared breakfast and considered the situation carefully. Obviously he was being watched. There was no point in watching him unless somebody meant to kill him. If the killer was that careful, he was obviously a dangerous man, and not to be taken lightly.

Why had he not made an attempt? Because he was stalking. Because he had not yet found the right opportunity.

Bostwick sat long over his coffee and mentally explored every approach to the situation. Putting himself in the unseen killer's place, he decided what he would do, and the following morning he began his puzzling tactics. Going around the house he had gone down to the arroyo,

then slipped back and, by using available cover, got the feed to his own horse. The ruse of the buckskin shirt had been used to make the watcher believe another man had entered the house. If he was correct in his guess that the killer was a careful man, the fellow would wait until he knew Bostwick was alone.

Bostwick was playing for time, working out a solution. Somehow he had to find out when the killer expected to kill, and from where. It was not long before he arrived at the same solution that had come to Cap Moffit.

The one time he could be depended upon to be at a given spot, not too far from cover, was when he curried his horse. That black was the love of his life, and he cared for the horse as he would for a child. The logical place was from the bed of the T U Creek. Flowing as it did, from Elk Ridge, it presented a natural approach. Searching it, Bostwick found a few faint tracks. The killer had been down this way, had made sure of his ground.

Jim Bostwick prepared supper that night with a scowl on his face. Something, some idea, nagged at his consciousness but was not quite realized. There was something he had missed, but one thing he had not missed. Whoever the killer was, he had been hired by Charley Gore.

Now it has been said that Jim Bostwick was no gunfighter. Yet there was a time when he had faced one, back in Yellowjacket, and Jim Bostwick had come out ahead. Those who knew him best knew that Jim Bostwick was a tough man, easygoing usually, but get him mad and he would walk into a den of grizzlies and drag the old man grizzly out by the scruff of his neck. He was that kind of man. Angered, he had an unreasoning courage that was absolutely without fear of consequences or death.

Jim Bostwick was growing angry now. He didn't like being hunted, and he liked even less the thought behind it, and the man behind it. More than once he had walked into the face of a gun, and with a queer kind of fatalism he was sure that some day he would die just that way. Yet he knew what he was going to do now. He was going to get this killer, and then he was going to get Charles Gore.

Yet he was not without the usual rough, ironic cowboy sense of humor so common in the West. The killer was up there on the hill hiding in the brush, and all the time the intended victim knew it. Suddenly, he began to chuckle. An idea had come to him, and one he would enjoy.

GETTING his pick and shovel he went out beside the house at a place just far enough away, but one which allowed no nearby cover, and commenced to dig. High on Elk Ridge, Cap Moffit stared down at Bostwick, puzzled by the digging. He became more puzzled as the hole became outlined. It was about six feet long and probably no more than half that wide. Jim Bostwick was digging a grave!

While digging, the idea that had been nagging at Bostwick's memory flowered suddenly. There had been other cases such as this. Lone men murdered without a clue, killed by some hidden marksman who then had vanished. There had been a family of three, slain one after another, over in the Panhandle.

Cap Moffit!

Jim Bostwick walked into the cabin and put the coffee pot on the stove. Nothing much was known about Cap Moffit. He was a rumor, perhaps a legend. A rancher had hinted once, at the beginning of a range war, that the proper way to end one was to send for Moffit. It had been a casual remark, yet seemed to have information behind it. After that, there had been other stories, guarded, indefinite. It seemed that some of the more powerful cattlemen knew where they could get a killer when one was wanted.

Cap Moffit had been suspected of the Panhandle killings. His method had been talked about—the careful planning, the unerring marksmanship, the cold efficiency.

Now Jim Bostwick was sure the same man was lying up there on Elk Ridge. Of course, there were other killers for hire,

but none with Moffit's careful, almost precise manner of killing. Realizing who he had to deal with sharpened his attention. If that was Cap Moffit, this was going to be anything but easy.

Cap had the reputation of shooting but once—and he did not miss.

Yet that in itself might be an advantage if Bostwick could continue to prevent him from getting the chance he wanted—or lead him into a trap, believing he had it.

He got a slab of wood and carved on it. Then he took it out and placed it at the head of the open grave. From the top of the ridge, Moffit saw it. A cold, unimaginative man except when it came to killing, Cap Moffit was puzzled. Anything he did not understand disturbed him, and he did not understand this. For the first time he made a change in his plans. He decided to crawl close enough to read what was carved on the slab through his field-glasses.

Bostwick came out, saddled up, always keeping the horse between himself and the available shelter. Then he mounted and rode away. Using the cut of the T U Creek, Cap Moffit came down the mountain and got into position under a huge old cotton wood and lifted his glass.

Cut deep and blackened with soot the words were plain, all too plain!

Here Lies
Cap Moffit, Killer
Shot Down
Upon
This Spot
April 1877

Cap Moffit lowered his glasses and wiped his eyes. He was crazy! It couldn't be! His second long look told the same story, and he lowered the glasses. He was known! Jim Bostwick knew him!

He looked again at the carved slab. An eerie feeling stole over him. It was unnatural. It was crazy. A man looking at his own grave marker. Only the date was blank, but the month was this month, the year this year. It was a warning—and it might be a prophecy.

Cap Moffit drew back and shook his head irritably. He was a fool to be disturbed by such a thing. Bostwick thought he was smart! Why, the fool! He'd show him!

YET how had Bostwick known him? How could he be so sure?

Cap Moffit rolled a smoke and lit it, irritation strong within him, yet there was underlying worry, too. Had he known that at that very minute Jim Bostwick was scouting the ridge top, he would have been even more worried.

Jim Bostwick had gambled on Moffit's curiosity, and to some extent, he did not care. There was a hard heedlessness about Jim Bostwick when aroused. He did not like being hunted. He did not like the necessity to be careful to avoid that assassin's bullet. Leaving the ranch, he had taken the trail toward town, but he had not followed it far, but turned left and ridden round the end of Elk Ridge and mounted through the trees on the southern side.

Shortly, he had found Moffit's trail, knowing the tracks from those he had seen before. Now he rode with caution, his Winchester in his hand. Soon he found Moffit's horse, and on the inspiration of a moment, he stripped off saddle and bridle and turned the animal loose. Then he followed the trail of the walking man and found his various hideouts on the ridge-top.

Rightly, he deduced that the killer was down below, but he guessed wrong. Even as he found the last place where Moffit had rested, under the big pine, Moffit was coming back up the gully of the T U Creek. He was coming slowly and carefully as was his wont, but his mind was preoccupied. He did not like the thought that his prospective victim knew who he was. What if he talked? What if, even now, he had gone to town to report to the sheriff?

Even as this thought struck him, Moffit noticed something else. He had reached the back slope of the ridge, and he noticed a black saddled horse standing some two hundred yards away. Yet even as he saw the horse, the black's head jerked up, its

ears pricked, and it looked at him.

Something moved in the brush near the horse's head, and Cap Moffit's rifle came up, leaping to his shoulder. He saw the leaping body of Jim Bostwick, and he fired. The black sprang away, running, and Bostwick dropped, but as he hit ground, he fired!

The bullet clipped leaves not inches from his head and Cap Moffit dropped to the ground. He slid downhill a few feet, then got up and, running lightly, circled toward his horse. He had no wish to fight a gun battle on that brush-covered, boulder-strewn mountainside. Such a battle would be too indefinite, for there not only marksmanship would be important, but woodcraft as well.

Moffit ran lightly toward his horse, then stopped. The horse was gone. An empty bridle and saddle awaited him!

Furious, he dropped back a few feet and took shelter among the rocks. He was fairly trapped! Unless—unless he could get Bostwick's horse.

It had run off, but would not go far. Probably his bullet had burned it. Yet he must be careful, for even now Bostwick might be coming down the mountain. The man would rightly deduce that the ambusher would head for his horse, so even now he might be drawing near.

Cap Moffit began to sweat. Something had gone wrong this time and it would take all his ingenuity to get himself out of it alive. The man hunting him was no fool.

Jim Bostwick, warned by the quick swing of the black's head, had dropped. It was that dropping movement which drew the shot. Instantly, he rolled over and began to crawl, worming his way a full thirty yards before he stopped. His own bullet had been an instinctive reply and he had no idea how close it had come. Yet there was nothing in him that warned him to retreat. His only idea was to get the killer for hire who had come here to kill him.

The woods were still, and the sun was hot. Here under the trees, now that the breeze had died, it was sticky and still. The air was sultry, and sweat trickled down his face. His neck itched from dust, and from pine needles picked up when he rolled over. There was the acrid smell of gunpowder from his rifle, and the silence of the woods. His horse had stopped running somewhere off among the trees.

JIM BOSTWICK waited. Patience and alertness would win now. Here in the woods, anything might happen. His throat felt dry and he wished for a drink. Somewhere he thought he heard a faint sound, but he did not move. He was lying on brown, parched pine needles in the blazing hot sun. Around him were the sharp edges and corners of rock thrust from the earth of the ridge, and not far away were larger boulders and a huge fallen log. It offered better cover, but more suspicious cover than he now had.

He waited. Somewhere an eagle cried. Something tiny scurried among the leaves. Then all was still.

His horse would come back to him. The black was trained to do just that. Yet even as he realized the black would soon be coming, another thought occurred. Cap Moffit would try to catch the horse and get away! Or kill him!

Moffit was cunning. Suppose he realized the horse was going back to Bostwick? And that he had only to wait and be guided by the horse? The black would find him, for a horse can smell out a trail as well as some dogs, if the trail is not an old one. More than once Jim Bostwick had seen horses do just that, and the black had often followed him in that way.

The sun was blazing hot. There was no breeze. The rocks glistened with desert varnish, smooth as mirrors. Far away he heard the horse walking. Bostwick did not like waiting. It had not been his way to wait, but to barge right in, swinging or shooting, and letting things happen as they would. This was Cap Moffit's game. The cool, careful killer's game.

Moffit would be coming. Moffit *had* to kill him now. He forced himself to lie still. The black was nearer now. Somewhere he heard a faint whisper of sound,

the brushing of jeans on a rock or branch. He slid his hand back to the trigger guard of the rifle, gripped the gun with two hands, ready to leap and shoot.

There was no further sound. The horse had stopped. Probably the black had seen Moffit.

Bostwick waited, sweating, his back cooking under the direct rays of the spring sun. Every muscle was tensed and ready for action. Suddenly there was a flashing movement and a gun blasted, a rifle bullet cut through his hat brim and burned along his back. Instantly he fired, not holding his shots, one in the center, then quickly left and right of the spot from which the shot had come.

Another bullet notched his ear and he rolled over, down the south side of the ridge, trying to avoid the next shot until he could get to his feet. A bullet smashed dirt into his eyes and he fired blindly.

Rolling over, he lunged to his feet and dived for the shelter of some rocks. A bullet smashed into the rocks and ricocheted almost in his face, whining past his ear with a scream like a banshee. He hit ground and behind him he heard Moffit running to get another shot. The rifle roared behind him and he felt his rifle smashed from his hands, and saw its stock was splintered.

He lunged to his feet again, and threw himself in a long dive for some brush as the rifle bellowed again. He felt the shock of that bullet and knew that he was hit. Moffit wasn't stopping, but was coming on. Bostwick whirled and grabbed for his sixshooter.

As it came into his hand, he threw himself to his feet just as Moffit sprang into the open. Jim Bostwick braced himself with the world rolling under him and the sweat in his eyes and the smell of blood in his nostrils, and he threw lead from his .44 and saw dust jump from Moffit's shirt. The smaller man fell back and hit the ground but shot from the ground. Jim Bostwick felt the shock of that bullet, but he fired as he was falling and missed.

He rolled over into the brush and, filled with sudden panic that he might get caught there in the open, he fought and scrambled his way through the brush. Fighting to get to shelter, he left a trail of scratched earth and blood behind him.

WHEN he could stop he rolled over to a sitting position and reloaded his six-shooter. There was no sound. He knew that Cap Moffit was not dead, but that one of them would die here, perhaps both. His gun loaded, he looked to his wounds. He had a hole through the fleshy upper part of his thigh, and it was bleeding badly. He plugged that with a handkerchief torn to use on both sides, then examined his chest.

He was afraid the bullet had struck him in a vital spot for the shock of it had turned him sick. However, he was fortunate. The bullet had struck his hip bone and ricocheted off, making a nasty open wound, but nothing deep. He drew the lips of the wound together and bound it with his torn shirt.

There was neither sound nor movement. His canteen was on his horse and the horse would come if he called. The black was probably waiting for just that.

Jim Bostwick checked his belt. His six-shooter now held six shells, for he was going to be using it, not carrying it, and there were still twenty-odd shells in his belt. If he could not win with that number, he would never win.

Rage welled up in him and suddenly, heedless of consequences, he shouted, "I'm going' to kill you, Cap! You've dry-gulched your last man!"

"Come and get me then!" Moffit taunted. "You're so full of holes now you won't last the night!"

Jim Bostwick rubbed his unshaven jaw. He rolled over, thrusting his six-shooter in his belt. His arms were strong and unhurt, he could drag himself, or hobble if he could get up on his good leg.

Slowly and painfully, he worked his way along the side of the ridge into the deeper brush and trees. Dust and sweat caked his face, but his heavy jaw was set and frozen against the biting pain. In a dense clump of brush, he waited. The

horse was his ace-in-the-hole. The black would not leave, and he could call to him. Had Moffit been active, he might have reached the horse but, smelling of blood, there was small chance of any stranger getting near.

Under the bushes, Bostwick lowered himself and lay on the pine needles, panting hoarsely. He must not pass out—he must stay alert. Cap Moffit had not only money for a reason now, but he must kill Bostwick or die himself.

Pain welled up and went through the rancher. He gritted his teeth against it, and against the weakness that was in him. Soon he would start out. He would get going.

A faint coolness touched his face, a stirring breath of air. He lifted his head and looked around. There was a bank of cloud over the mountains, piled up thunderheads. The coolness touched his face again, breeze with the smell of rain in it. The country could use rain. The grass needed it. His head sank forward.

Only a minute it seemed, yet when he opened his eyes it was black—black and wet. It was raining. He had passed out.

His eyes had opened to darkness and a vast roaring that filled the world, a roaring of gigantic masses of wind and almost continuous thunder. Like a solid wall the wind swept the ridge, bending the huge trees like willows and sweeping the rocks with icy scythes of driving rain, pounding the earth and lashing at his cowering, rain-drenched body.

Suddenly, below the awful roar of the wind along the towering ridge, he heard another sound—faint, but definite. A vast bursting flare of lightning illumined the ridge with blinding, incandescent light. Through the flare there was a vicious whip-lash of vivid blue flame and his brain seemed split apart by a rending crash!

THE HUGE pine near which he had been lying seemed to burst under his eyes and the towering mass of the tree toppled, falling away from him, leaving the dead-white, fractured center exposed to the rain and the wind. Lightning whipped at the ridge, and the earth and rocks smelled of brimstone and charred pine needles.

And below the roar he heard again that whisper of sound. Lightning flared and in the white glare he saw Cap Moffit, eyes wide and staring, Cap Moffit, poised and waiting for the flare, gun in hand. Even as he glimpsed him, Moffit fired!

The bullet missed, and Jim Bostwick rolled over, grabbing wildly, desperately, for his own gun. Wildly he fired, hurling three fast shots at the place from which the shots had come. With a lunge, he made it to his feet, shot out a hand and grabbed the lightning-blasted stump even as lightning flared again. They shot as one man, then Bostwick let go his hold and lunged through the driving wall of rain at the spot where he had seen Moffit. They came together, and Bostwick struck wickedly with his gun-barrel and missed, falling forward. He rolled over quickly and saw the dark figure swaying above him. Moffit fired, the blast of flame only feet from Bostwick's face. He felt the wicked sting of burning powder and felt the blow of the bullet as it struck him.

Huge billowing cloud rolled low over the ridge and the whiplike flashes of lightning danced like dervishes of flame along the ridge. The forest would have been aflame had it not been for the great masses of water that were driven along it.

Moffit fired again, but he was weaving like one of the bushes around them and the shot missed. Bostwick rolled over. Grimly he struggled, moaning with eagerness to get up, to get his hands on Moffit. He swung out a wild, clutching hand and grabbed one of the killer's ankles. He jerked and the man fell and, bloody and wounded as Bostwick was, he clawed to grab a hold on the man's throat. There was another vivid streak of lightning, then Moffit's gun roared. . . .

Consciousness returned but slowly. Jim Bostwick lay flat on his face on the rocks of the ridge, swept bare by the violence of wind and rain. Around him where all had been rushing wind and roaring rain

there was dead stillness now. His head thudded with hammer-blows of agony. His shoulder and arm were stiff, one leg seemed useless, and every movement seared him with pain.

The rain had ceased. The wind had gone. The might of the thunder in the lonely ravines to the south and west had turned to the far-off mumbling of a puppy. Storm-tossed clouds scattered the skies and vied with the stars for attention. And Jim Bostwick lay sprawled and alone on the ridge, his body spent, weakened from loss of blood and the whipping rain. And then he put out a hand and found his gun. Somehow he got his knees under him and lifted himself. He spun the cylinder of the gun and it turned.

Fumbling with clumsy fingers, he worked the ejector rod and pushed out the empty shells. Then he loaded the gun with care from his belt. There was nobody near him. He could see that. Wherever Moffit was, he was not here.

Jim Bostwick fumbled around, feeling, and then he found a broken limb. Using it for a crutch, he got to his feet.

Blackie would have gone. The storm would have driven him off. Bostwick knew that straight ahead of him and more than a thousand feet down was the ranch, and if he was to live, he must get back to that ranch.

It was no use to try going around by the trail. He would never make it. Somehow he must fumble and fall and feel his way to the bottom. How long it took him, he did not know, but he knew when he reached it, and his fingers found something else. A horse's track!

IF A TRACK was here, it had to be made since the storm. He called out, risking a shot from Moffit, if he was still alive and nearby. He called again, and again. Then he heard a low whinny and the *clop, clop* of hoofs.

"Blackie!" he whispered. "Blackie!"

The horse snorted and shied, then came nearer, snuffling in the darkness. He reached up, and the horse shied again.

[*Turn page*]

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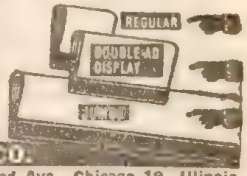

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He spoke his name and Blackie stood still. One hand got the stirrup, and then he pulled himself into the wet saddle.

"Home, Blackie!" he whispered and, as if waiting for just that, the black turned and started out across the little valley toward the house.

Sagging over the pommel, he still managed to cling to it, and when the black stopped at the steps of the house, he almost fell from the saddle. And when he hit the steps his hand struck the face. He grabbed for a gun, then stopped. The face was still, the body unmoving, but warm.

In the still, cold light from a vague gray pre-dawn, he stared down at the crumpled figure. It was Cap Moffit.

Jim Bostwick chuckled, a hoarse, choking sound. "You—you couldn't take it!" he sneered.

Turning over he reached with his good hand for the girth and managed to get it loose and let the saddle fall. Then he pulled the black's head down and got the bridle off.

"Take a roll, boy," he whispered, "and rustle some grub."

He got the door open, then got a hand on Moffit's collar and dragged him inside, leaving one boot, caught on the step with a spur. He got Moffit's gun and put them both near his hand.

It took him an hour to get his wounds uncovered, and another hour to get them bathed and dressed, after a fashion. As he worked, he looked grimly at the unconscious man. "I'm still moving," he said. "I'm going to come through."

When he had his wounds dressed, he went to work on Moffit. He was working on nerve, he knew that, and nothing but nerve. He kept himself going, forced himself to keep moving. He got the wounded man fixed up and got water heating on the stove, then slumped in a chair, his face haggard and bearded, his eyes hollow, his hair tangled with mud and blood—the last bullet had cut his scalp open and given him what was probably a mild concussion. He stared across at the unconscious killer, his eyes bleak.

When the water was hot, he made coffee

and laced it with whisky and burned his mouth gulping a cup of it, then another. Then he pulled himself, sliding the chair by gripping the wall, until he was close to Cap Moffit. He tied the wounded killer's wrists and ankles. Some time later, sprawled on the bed, he passed out again.

Hours after that, with daylight streaming in the door from a sinking sun, he awakened. His eyes went at once to Moffit. The wounded man lay on the floor, glaring at him.

Bostwick swung his feet to the floor and stared blearily at Moffit. "Trussed up like a dressed chicken!" he sneered. "A hell of a gunman you are!"

Moffit stared at him. "You don't look so good yourself!" he retorted.

Bostwick caught the ledge along the wall with his good hand and pulled himself erect. He slapped the gun in his waist-band. "I still got a gun," he said, and crept along the wall to the kitchen where he got the fire going, then fell into a chair. "You ain't so hot with a short gun," he said.

"I got *you*."

Bostwick chuckled. "Yeah, you're holding me, ain't you? I'm dead, ain't I? You two-bit imitation of a killer, you never saw the day you could kill me."

Moffit shook his head. "Maybe you're right," he said. "You must have three bullets in you now."

"Four hits you made." Bostwick chuckled. "I'm carrying no lead."

HIS stomach felt sick, but he managed to get water on the stove and make coffee. When he fell back in the chair again he felt weak and sicker.

"You better set still," Moffit said. "You're all in." He paused. "Whyn't you shoot me when you had the chance?"

"Aw—" Bostwick stared at him, grim humor in his eyes—"I like a tough man. I like a fighter. You did pretty good up on that mountain last night, pretty good for a drygulching killer."

Cap Moffit said nothing. For the first time the words of another man hurt. He

[*Turn page*]

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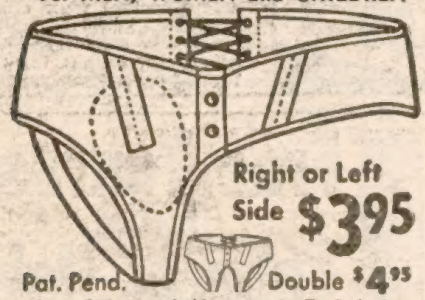

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stared down at his sock feet, and he had no reply to make.

"You going to turn me in for a hanging?" he finally asked.

"Naw," Bostwick poured coffee into a cup and slid it across the table. "Somebody'll shoot you sure as the Lord made little apples. You ever come back around here and I will. This here Tom Utterback who owns this spread, he's a good man."

"He's got a good man for a friend."

Two sick, wounded men struggled through four days, and it was Bostwick who struggled. Moffit watched him, unbelieving. It was impossible that any man could be so tenacious of life, so unbelievably tough. Yet this big, hard man was not giving up. No man, Moffit felt suddenly, could kill such a man. There was something in him, something black, bitter and strong, something that would not die.

On the sixth morning, Cap Moffit was gone. He had taken a gray from the other corral, and he had gone off, riding his recovered saddle—wounded, but alive.

Tom Utterback rode up to the ranch on the ninth day. He stared at the pale shadow of a man who greeted him, gun in hand. He stared at the bloody bandage on the leg.

"You wasn't in that gun fight in town, was you?" he demanded.

"What gun fight?"

"Stranger name of Cap Moffit. He had some words with Charley Gore and two of his boys. They shot it out."

"They get him?"

"Don't know. He was shot up bad, but he rode out on his own horse."

"What happened to Gore?"

Utterback shook his head. "That stranger was hell on wheels. He killed Gore and one of his men and wounded the other."

"Yeah, he was a good man, all right." Jim Bostwick backed up and sat down in a chair. "Make some coffee, will you? And a decent meal. I'm all in."

A few minutes later he opened his eyes. He looked up at the ceiling, then out the door where another sun was setting.

"I'm glad he got away," he muttered.

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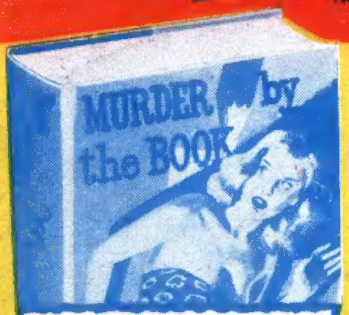

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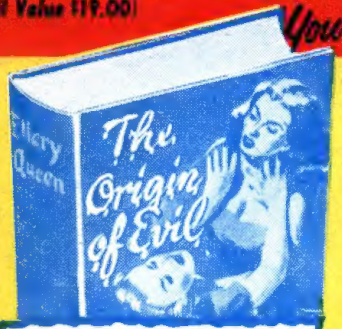

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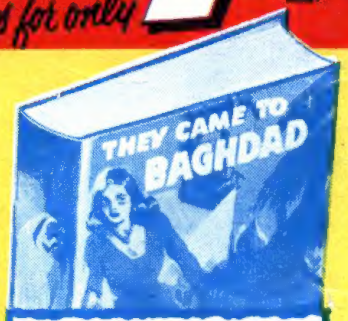

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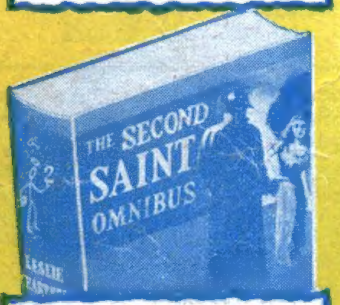

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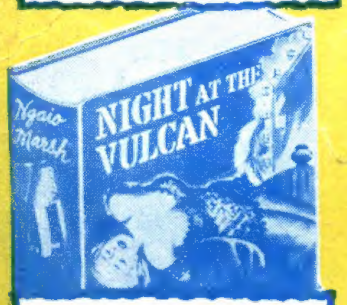

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